Soviet Russian Stories of the 60s and 70s

• Progress Publishers • Moscow •

A "Soviet Literature" Anthology

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Foreword

The editorial board of *Soviet Literature* and Progress Publishers are to begin issuing in 1977 a series of unique anthologies featuring the best writings published in the magazine.

We are offering the reader a selection of contemporary short stories which have been well received by our multinational reading public. We think that the foreign reader will find these tales all the more interesting because they are mainly about life as lived in the Soviet Union today and have been written by some of our most distinguished prose-writers. The volume of Russian short stories will be followed by anthologies of stories and poems by writers of the Soviet nationalities. Other editions are also planned.

We hope that the proposed series will give some idea of the problems with which Soviet writers are concerned today and how they endeavour to mirror contemporary reality in literary form. It might be appropriate in this connection to say something about contemporary Soviet

writing and also about the magazine which has been called on to present it to the foreign reader.

Almost every time I arrive at the editorial office, I find a pile of letters on my desk, including some with foreign postmarks. We have received one from Donald Bisset of London who was a guest of *Soviet Literature* magazine two years ago. Bisset is, in fact, continuing an argument that began in the editorial office here. It is about the works being published in the magazine. About the real artistic values for which they are notable. About the ability of these works to influence the reader's thoughts and feelings. About the narrative gift and the ability to engage the reader's interest; about characters, about the language of fiction—in a word, about all that is enduring and brings a book to life.

Soviet literature has come to the attention of the foreign reader as that of the country which accomplished the October Revolution and decisively changed the political climate of our age. Needless to say, the influence of contemporary writing in the Soviet Union has been considerably furthered by the prestige of our great Russian literary tradition, whose role in the spiritual regeneration of mankind could hardly be overestimated. But, however considerable this prestige may be, what matters most is everything that our new literature represents: its ideological values, its creative discoveries, its force of emotional impact.

Let the facts speak for themselves. Millions of young people aged twenty-five to thirty years in 1941—and this applies not merely to Soviet people, but to those of their generation in other countries—absorbed the spirit of the Revolution and learned the ABC of anti-fascism thanks to books by Soviet writers. The main brunt of the blow delivered by fascism was borne by those generations, and they rebuffed it. They learned from books out of which Hitler made bonfires when he tried to send up in smoke not only German, but Russian "sedition" as well: Gorky, Mayakovsky, Fadeyev.

Soviet literature is alive, as is the idea contained in that literature; it is alive, as are the minds and hearts which respond to it, as is the future towards which it aspires. Interest in Soviet literature is growing abroad. People want a clear picture of life in the world that was

brought into being by the October Revolution, by the community of peoples that form the USSR. They want a clear picture of how life works out for the man in that world, of what is typical in that life. They want to know about the moral climate in the multinational land of the Soviets and to what extent it encourages the development of PERSONALITY.

Hardly anyone would assert that the modern foreign reader is interested only in literature that is free from social content. The interest of the foreign reader in the classics of our age—the works of Thomas Mann, Bernard Shaw, Ernest Hemingway, Romain Rolland, and William Faulkner, and also in many other writers who have left their mark on world literature—Berthold Brecht, Carl Sandberg, Broniewsky, and Paul Eluard—is explained by the fact that their writings are full of social content. Incidentally, this is also shown by the foreign literature of the present time. The powerful upsurge of contemporary Latin American literature has brought to the forefront in poetry and prose a whole galaxy of names without whom the process of world literature today would be inconceivable: Neruda, Guillén, Asturias, Fuentes, Carpentier; and I would go so far as to say that this is because it is a literature of struggle, a literature charged with social content. And this is as it should be. If literature is called upon to explore the relations between man and society and help him penetrate to the essence of existence, if its goal is to define man's place in the contemporary world, then can such literature be free from social content?

Very often foreign writers visiting the editorial office of *Soviet Literature,* when discussing the principles by which works are chosen for the magazine, ask us: "What matters most to you in making your choice? What your readers want, or what you want yourselves? "

The question is put clearly enough. In answering, I can only refer to the magazine's past experience, and this shows that there was not a single case of a book being well received by our own public and yet being rejected abroad. In other words, a true work of art knows no frontiers. In selecting our material, we too follow this principle, which has been tried and tested over a period of many years: we give the foreign reader what has reached

the hearts of our own Soviet public. But it would be wrong to claim that the foreign reader does not have his own attitude, and approach to our literature.

I would like to draw attention to three such instances.

First. For the reader abroad, our literature is unique by virtue of its very nature: it is an alliance of literatures in no less than seventy-five languages! There has never been anything like it before in the history of world culture, let alone in world literature. The reader can trace how the national literatures are developing within our community. For him, this is without historical precedent. Interest in this special feature of Soviet writing is all the more understandable because our national literatures have produced works that, in recent years, have won recognition far beyond the frontiers of the Soviet Union, and this includes the young literatures brought into being by the October Revolution.

In the last ten to fifteen years, Soviet national literatures have produced names widely known abroad today: Chinghiz Aitmatov, Rasul Gamzatov, Kaisyn Kuliev, Akhmedjan Abu-Bakar, David Kugultinov.

The Avar Rasul Gamzatov, the Balkarian Kaisyn Kuliev, the Kalmyk David Kugultinov. What does the world know about the peoples who produced these poets? Probably not so much: just that the North Caucasus is a brave, freedom-loving land of songs.... And what is the poetry of Gamzatov, Kuliev, Kugultinov? It is the poetry of mature and, I would say, refined thought. It is philosophical poetry in the true sense of the word. But what do we know about the literatures represented by these poets? You will learn nothing about these literatures from books dating back to prerevolutionary times for the simple reason that the Avarian, Balkarian and Kalmyk written traditions did not really begin to develop until after the October Revolution, and so these poets were summoned to life by a literature born of the Revolution. We treasure their names all the more for that reason.

The merit of a work is said to be determined by the extent to which it combines the eternal values of truth and beauty. The best of what has been created by Soviet literature is distinguished by the truth of a great idea, the beauty of sublime art.

And here we come to another feature noted by the foreign reader who considers our literature. It is the most important of all and it is the one with which we began our discussion. Ours is not only the literature of the country that accomplished the October Revolution, it is also a literature *about* this great event. Even sixty years after the Revolution, Soviet books about those unforgettable days are as alive as in the years when they were written. And this is hardly surprising! The Russian Revolution opened up a new era in the history of mankind. For this reason, our revolutionary novel (and not only the novel) has become an object of close attention from world literature and we recognise its features in books being written today by authors of different nations.

Third, and last. The foreign reader is keenly interested in writings about the Great Patriotic War, against fascism. This literature lives in the minds of people not only because mankind remembers the evil doings of fascism and is, unfortunately, not certain that it has vanished into oblivion. Not only because, in its vast coverage of events and in its penetration into their true significance, this literature is a unique chronicle of a war of liberation in world history. Not only because the very fact of the writers having taken part in the war was an incomparable feat of the human spirit. But because it is also a true literature in its artistic faithfulness.... What was said by Ivan Bunin almost at the end of his life when he paid tribute to the soldier's muse of Alexander Tvardovsky, may, without the slightest detriment to our outstanding poet, be applied to the poetry and prose written during the war years by Alexander Fadeyev, Mikhail Sholokhov, Alexei Tolstoy, Nikolai Tikhonov and Konstantin Simonov, and to many books of the post-war period. What could be more blasphemous than the claims of some Western critics, still to be heard on occasion, that this literature does not really exist? Not we, but our friends abroad, for whom the heroic achievements of Soviet literature during the war years are dear and eternal, will put paid to this contemptible slander.

The editors of *Soviet Literature* magazine invariably take into consideration these aspects of the foreign reader's approach to our books, just as they bear in mind

the constantly growing interest in the present times, in the contemporary processess taking place in Soviet society. The foreign reader is interested in life here, because it is the life of the state which was the first to accomplish an unparalleled social experiment.

The magazine is published in nine languages: English, French, German, Spanish, Polish, Czech, Slovak, Hungarian and Japanese. Its purpose is to acquaint the reader with anything new that emerges in the Soviet literature today. It features mainly prose and poetry, including the novel and the long short story.

Russian literary monthlies have a tradition of publishing novels and long short stories. We are unable to publish many novels, since this inevitably means printing them by the chapter or in instalments, and this is inconvenient for editors and readers alike. However, we are always willing to publish long short stories, since they contain elements of the novel. They make it possible to give a panorama of a character's life, to follow it stage by stage, to see how it develops. True, there are short stories which cover a whole lifetime, such as Chekhov's "Ionych", just as there are novels devoted to just one day, like V. Katayev's *Time, Forward!* ; but these are the exception rather than the rule. The typical long short story covers either a character's whole life or a certain stage in that life.

There is another reason why we like to publish long short stories. If we follow closely the latest trend in the search for new forms in literary prose, we shall see that the lyrical hero has become increasingly prominent: today, prose would be inconceivable without him. This is also a feature of the contemporary Soviet long short story and gives it the exceptional attraction of showing contemporary life in all its multiformity. The contemporary long short story is said to have something of the chronicle about it in its closeness to reality and to the events of the present day. In our view, this does not compromise the long short story but only makes it more topical, which is important when our own times are the subject of artistic generalisation and exploration. Above all, this "chronicality" goes hand in hand with life as it is lived, with real characters and true-life conflicts.

Ever since Turgenev, for whom the long short story was probably the chief form for depicting the life of the times, this genre has helped the writer exert an impact on the world around him.

Soviet literature has absorbed and developed this tradition of the Russian classics.

Literature can do a great deal to arouse in man the fighter for whom there is no cause more sacred than the lofty ideal of the freedom and fraternity of the world's toilers. But Soviet literature also has a task of its own: to show the world the land of Lenin. I shall risk repeating what I said at the beginning of this article: better than anything else, literature can give a clear picture of the life we live, of man's mode of existence, his interests, the essence of his relations with the family, the collective, the country; what he sees as his mission in life, and to what extent he is capable of fulfilling it.

If it is true that the vitality of literature is determined by its faith in the future, then this is the living strength of our literature. Nothing binds us to the future more than the destiny of our socialist homeland, for the future was standing by its very cradle.

Savva Dangulov,
Editor-in-Chief,
Soviet Literature Magazine

SERGEI KRUTILIN

(b.1921)

Sergei Krutilin's books are a part of his life and an integral part of the life of the generation born at the beginning of the 20s. The writer spent his childhood in the small village of Delekhovo in the Ryazan district. In 1940 he graduated from a specialised building school and then went to work in the Far East. At the very beginning of the Great Patriotic War of 1941-1945 Krutilin served at the front. After being seriously wounded he was demobilised and went to study at the Moscow State University. Then he began work as a journalist. As a correspondent for *Literaturnaya Gazeta* and the *Smena* journal, Krutilin travelled extensively around the country and wrote essays and stories which were collected in his first book *Round the Corner* (1961). Next came the novels *Snowdrops, Lipiagi (Notes of a Village School-Teacher), Lieutenant Artyukhov*, and the long short stories *Over the Hill-Side, Driven Rain* and *The Old Bird-Box*. Referring to his last three stories the author wrote: "If the stories I have told make the reader ponder about his own place in life, if they arouse in him a love for nature and the world about us, if they make a young boy just a little kinder, then I consider that the goal I set myself has been achieved."

DRIVEN RAIN

1

Ivan Antonovich stooped down mechanically to pick up a trampled sprig of lily-of-the-valley. There were flowers all around—wild and cultivated, so many of them that bouquets of narcissuses and tulips hid not only the newly-made grave, but the clods of damp clay scattered all over the little patch of land cramped between the wrought-iron enclosures and tombstones of other graves.

Still unable to comprehend what had happened, Ivan Antonovich stood twisting the flower in his hand. The white bells, crushed under a heel, were flattened out and smeared with dirt, and the stem was broken, so that when Ivan Antonovich picked it up the top drooped.

"How she loved lilies-of-the-valley!" Supporting the broken stem on his palm, he gently laid the nosegay on her grave. Somebody called to him from the central path: "Come along, Ivan Antonovich! Don't torture yourself. We'll all end up there one day." He could not

see who it was for the tall lilac bushes lining the path. He could not even be sure he had heard the voice, perhaps he had only imagined it. It's good that Lena died in spring when the flowers are in bloom, he said to himself.

"Good...." "Lena died...." He was suddenly struck by the significance of these words. Never is it good to die, and especially unnatural is it to die in spring when all of nature is coming to life. But Lena had chosen the spring. She shrank from the thought of her grave being decorated with artificial flowers. "They'll hang those horrid hoops on it," she had said once when occasion brought them to the graveyard, nodding toward the rusty carcasses of wreaths with remnants of faded paper leaves and flowers clinging to them. "In summer the sun, in winter the snow takes all the colour out of them and the ribbons hang in strips like old rags. Ugh!" She shuddered and added softly: "I shouldn't like to die in winter. Very uncomfortable for everybody. Nor in autumn. When my time comes, let it be spring."

Ivan Antonovich had not taken her words seriously at the time: women were always sentimental! What difference did it make what they put on your grave, live or artificial flowers? Now, however, the remembrance of these words shook him to the core. Lena died at the time she most loved as if she had really chosen it for her death—that was what shook him. She wanted her grave to be covered with live flowers, and here was he, alive, standing above her grave and thinking: Let it be old hoops, let it be strips of rags—what does it matter? The only thing that mattered was to be alive this spring, and next autumn, and next winter, and another winter....

The thought that he was alive and could see these flowers and the lilac growing along the road and the bright sunshine and the flight of the bee and hear the cawing of the rooks imbued him with new strength. He turned and walked resolutely towards the gates.

2

Hers had been a slow and painful death. Despite the pain, she had remained conscious almost to the end and

kept hoping for recovery. Ivan Antonovich kept hoping too. She had been tended by an old and experienced physician, had been given the best medicines, Soviet and imported. Everyone had thought there was good reason for hope. It was only a week before, when, after the last operation, she had been put into a separate ward that she realised all was over. He too realised it when he was told that his wife had been removed to a special room on the ground floor.

Lena was still conscious but her strength was quickly ebbing. He sat down beside her. She took his hand and told him she was dying. He tried to convince her otherwise, saying he had talked to the head doctor who had sworn she would improve after this operation. His voice lacked conviction, for in his hurry to reach her bedside he had not seen the head doctor; furthermore he was always contending someone had "sworn" something, that was his favourite word and she knew it and this made him ashamed of his deception. She seemed not to notice it, so much had she to say to him. She talked and talked, now about Misha, their son, begging Ivan Antonovich to love and care for him; now about some trifling offences he did not remember but which she asked forgiveness for. In the end, when her mind seemed to be wandering, she began to tell him how she wished to be dressed in her coffin.

"I'm all right, I'm all right," she kept saying, wiping her chapped lips with the back of her hand. "Thin as a rail, of course, but who'll see that? They'll dress me up. My hair ... more like straw. I had a piece of veil somewhere—mauve. Probably faded now. Find it and let Katya put it over my head." Withdrawing her hand out of his, she began patting down her hair. Then she talked about the veil again, insisting that it be tied round her head, and Ivan Antonovich, frozen with horror and with a sense of his own helplessness, pressed his thin, sinewy hands between his knees and thought, as he gazed at the beloved face of his wife, now scarcely recognisable, that it was indeed a law of nature that man was destined to be born and die in suffering; and just as, when he is born, he is swaddled in white, so on his deathbed he is covered with a shroud; and as the infant is beautiful in its innocence, so those who are taking leave of life wish to look their best.

Lena, for instance. In life she had given little thought to her appearance. And here she was concerned about how she would look in her coffin. True, her hair did make her look older. For a long time, ever since the war in fact, she had dyed it. A light henna wash. During the three months she had spent in hospital it had come to look like the fur of a silver sable—white at the roots with the curly ends still dyed. That is why she wanted the veil. Mauve. Search his memory as he would, he could not remember ever having seen the veil. The last time he came to the hospital he asked where it might be found, but Lena only shut her eyes wearily and turned away.

And so he did not carry out this, her last request. He suffered, feeling that he had failed her, but he could not find the veil. Neither he nor Lena had ever placed a high value on things for their own sake, and even so all sorts of old clothes they had accumulated during their long life together seemed to crowd them out of their flat. In the lumber room stood a trunk which had belonged to Granny Alevtina, Lena's mother. It was an old trunk which had served Granny Alevtina as a bed during the war when they had lived crowded into a tiny room. Now this trunk was packed full of old frocks, blouses and skirts. Lena had long since discarded them but for some reason could not throw them away. In the wardrobe hung cellophane bags with Ivan Antonovich's old suits, coats and scarves in them, leaving hardly any room place for the things he wore every day. Lena was saving them for their son, although he, too, had heaps of outworn clothes, for Misha grew faster than most boys and had to be newly outfitted every year.

When he came back from the hospital Ivan Antonovich rummaged through the trunk and untied every bundle it contained, yet he did not find the mauve veil. So he went to a draper's shop and bought her a silk kerchief with scenes of Venice on it for twelve rubles. He had never bought her even a cheap kerchief when she was alive, and here he was making her a present of an expensive one. It was not greed or parsimony that had prevented him, but the fact that stylish kerchiefs did not become her, nor did hats. Summer and winter she bound her head up in a simple scarf. And here he was with this expensive gift. When Katya, Lena's elder sister, saw it she

gave a little laugh. "Only sixteen-year-old kids wear such things," she said, and put something more appropriate over Lena's head, keeping the kerchief for herself, though she was nearer sixty than sixteen.

Lost in these ruminations, Ivan Antonovich mechanically pushed his way through the bushes to the central path.

3

The pavement was empty. A downfall of rain in the morning had left puddles on the asphalt which reflected the May sun, still bright even at so late an hour. Indeed he was blinded by the sparkling puddles.

He put on the hat he had held in his hand since the beginning of the ceremony and looked round.

The rooks were cawing in the tops of some old birches lining the graveyard fence. Ivan Antonovich turned to look back at his wife's grave, but the blossoming lilac bushes cut off his view of it. He took off his glasses, wiped them on his handkerchief, wiped his bleary eyes, replaced his glasses and made for the gate of the cemetery.

There he found Misha waiting for him.

"Everybody's waiting, father," he said, taking Ivan Antonovich by the arm and leading him to the little gate—the big one was already closed for the night.

In the shadow of the flower shop beside the gate stood a group of mourners. There were not many—perhaps ten, not more. Some of his colleagues from work whom they used to invite home, Lena's two sisters, Katya and Maria, with their husbands and children, Andrei Olkhovsky, a college friend of his, and Rosa, Misha's betrothed or—who could tell what young people's relations were these days?

His colleagues were smoking and talking in lowered voices. One of them, Lev Arkadievich Mezentsev, was standing apart and watching Ivan Antonovich with a sad, lost look. He understood his friend's grief: two years before he too had buried his wife and had been dragging out a solitary existence ever since.

With the appearance of Ivan Antonovich everyone showed animation. The only exception was Katya, who

remained motionless where she stood, a big woman in a light close-fitting nylon raincoat, with her hands crossed on her fat belly, her gaze fixed on a flock of sparrows that were flitting from the iron fence to the bushes and back again. Her eyes expressed neither pity nor grief, and this indifference was like a knife-thrust in Ivan Antonovich's heart. He tightened his lips to prevent a moan escaping and thought bitterly: Here she is, ten years older than Lena, been complaining of her health all her life, and she's alive, while Lena....

His eyes became moist, and to hide this moment's weakness from his friends he wiped his glasses again.

Mezentsev came over to him.

"We'd better be going," he said, nodding to his colleagues. The men threw away their cigarettes and set out unhurriedly in single file for the highway where the cars were parked.

"Have the musicians been paid?" asked Ivan Antonovich.

"Yes," said Mezentsev. "The Union took care of that," and he nodded in the direction of Senya Gilchevsky, chairman of their Trade Union organisation, a hearty, lazy fellow who could not even make an accurate copy of a blue-print, to say nothing of drawing an original one, but who was generally liked for his easy-going disposition.

"Why should the Union pay? I'm quite capable of paying myself," protested Ivan Antonovich, who despised Senya Gilchevsky, considering him a nonentity. And not without reason. Senya, who was almost forty, was unmarried and without a thought in his head; he spent his lunch-hour kicking a football round the yard of the Institute.

At the edge of the highway stood a chartered bus, two or three taxis and a Volga belonging to Mezentsev. Ivan Antonovich's colleagues made for the bus and got in, Lena's two sisters and their husbands took one taxi, their sons along with Misha and Rosa took another, Mezentsev led Ivan Antonovich to his car.

"We'll go together," he said, opening the door and motioning his friend to the back seat.

"Excuse me, Lev Arkadievich, but if you don't mind I prefer to walk; it's rather hot. You go along without me."

Lev Arkadievich made a gesture of disappointment but did not try to dissuade him. He appreciated his feelings. Slamming the door, he climbed into the front seat beside the driver and the car moved off. Behind it, enveloping Ivan Antonovich in a cloud of petrol fumes, went the bus and the taxis. Ivan Antonovich was left alone. Before following the cars, whose silhouettes were still etched against the black ribbon of the highway, he glanced back at the entrance to the graveyard. People were coming out of the gate one by one.

They've buried their dead too; and he drew a deep sigh. The sand crunched unpleasantly under his feet as he set out down the side of the road.

4

The town had spread out almost to the cemetery. It was now separated from it only by an open space some four hundred metres wide, and these four hundred metres had to be walked along the highway with cars passing back and forth, splashing through puddles. Every five paces or so Ivan Antonovich had to step aside to let one pass. Soon, however, he reached town and stepped up on the pavement. Here there were pedestrians hurrying on their way, little boys playing ball, little girls playing hop-scotch, but he noticed nobody, completely engrossed in his memories.

When he and Lena had moved to this district after the war, nothing but fields stretched beyond their house. Oh, yes, before the fields began there was a dark and dismal ravine with steep, almost vertical clayey slopes into which people were inclined to throw their junk. Then the fields. Fields to the very horizon, and against this horizon rose a little old church with its many onion-domes barely seen above the roofs of village houses and the crowns of willow trees. A birch wood followed a gully on the other side of the village, and to this wood they had loved to walk in summer. Many wild flowers grew there and Lena knew the names of them all and could tell interesting things about them. Ivan Antonovich, who could only identify a daisy, listened to her as attentively as their little son Misha did.

In winter they went to the birch wood on skis. Though Ivan Antonovich was considerably older than Lena, he was the best skier of the three. They crossed the dam and skirted the village, whose houses were half buried in snow; this brought them to a hillside on which the kolkhoz had planted a large orchard, on the other side of which was another ravine, then a tiny field which for some reason was never planted and was therefore overgrown with weeds, then the birch wood. The wood was laced by quiet paths and shallow ravines and was in all weather and seasons a delightful retreat.

One day in early March Misha went skiing alone. When he came back he drew a branch of birdcherry out of the front of his jacket. Lena was as delighted as a child to see it; she thanked her son by kissing him and bustled about finding a vase, filling it with water, running from room to kitchen and asking Misha, who was wiping his skis out in the hall, where he had found it.

"In our woods, mother," he replied happily. "Which woods?" "The woods beyond the village where we go skiing." "You mean you went all that distance alone?" "No, I went with Alyosha Chuprin. You know what? They're building something or other there now." "Really?" "Really. They've brought concrete posts and slabs and an excavator is digging ditches. We wanted to go up to the excavator but the workmen wouldn't let us." "That's all right, we'll all go out together one of these days and find out what they're building."

The next Sunday they had guests, then there was a thaw, and it was not until the end of the month that they at last set out on their skis in a slight snowfall. As usual they went round the village and through the kolkhoz orchard where tomtits and starlings were flitting in the branches, climbed the hill and crossed the neglected field and—instead of entering their birch wood—they were confronted by a tall fence made of concrete slabs. The imprint of tractor tracks followed the fence, there were mounds of yellow clay beside it and the snow was stained with oil. They turned left and went along the fence looking for a chink to peer through. Before they had gone a hundred metres they heard music coming from the other side of it. Ivan Antonovich, who was in the lead, stopped and listened. There could be no doubt

about it—a funeral march was being played. The grown-ups exchanged glances but said nothing. Ivan Antonovich turned sharply away from the fence trampling the weeds underfoot and headed across the open field.

They skirted a village, skied several times down into the ravine, Ivan Antonovich falling, each time leaving deep furrows in his wake, to Misha's delight. The boy clapped his hands and pulled his father away to other hills.

His parents, however, were not talkative and seemed not to share his delight. When they reached home Lena fell exhausted into an armchair and Misha went over to her.

"Why did you beat it away from the fence, mum?" he asked. "Are they building a military plant or something?" "Not at all, Misha," she said, "they've ... they've just enclosed the space for a cemetery." "What's—a cemetery?"

Ivan Antonovich turned and looked at his wife disapprovingly from where he was putting the skis away in the hall.

"A cemetery? That's just another word for a graveyard." "Oh." The boy asked no more questions. His mother stroked his hair. "Why not make a cemetery out of it? We have no shops in our neighbourhood, at least we'll have a cemetery. When I die you won't have far to go to visit me. You will visit my grave, won't you, son?" "Of course. Dad and I'll come." "Dad won't, he doesn't love me that much, but you do, don't you, darling?"

Misha nodded and cuddled up to his mother. He was too young to understand what death was. His interests were elsewhere.

"Look, mum, I can't solve this problem." "Let's see it." Lena brightened up, took his arithmetic book and a pencil and paper, and they read the problem and began to solve it.

As he put the skis into the closet, Ivan Antonovich pondered over Lena's words, wondering how much was said in jest and how much was meant for him. He highly disapproved of her saying such things to a child. It was unforgivable to set the boy against his father and anyway Misha was too young to think about cemeteries and graveyards. He decided to have a talk with Lena.

And I never did, he said to himself as he walked gloomily along the pavement. I never did. How quickly the end comes. He was passing a block of houses that had sprung up on what had once been a potato field. On the open space beyond the ravine into which people used to throw their junk and where the frogs used to croak in the spring now rose a Metro station whose huge glass entrance-doors flashed in the sun. And in the wood where they had gone on skis in the winter, where they had taken such delight in the sun and frost and snow, there.... The birches, those that had remained untouched, were big trees now. And the children were big, were grown-ups. And their fathers were old men.

Burdened with such thoughts, he walked on unaware of the people about him.

5

All the guests could not be seated at the dining-table and so the kitchen table was brought in. The two tables were placed down the length of the big room, from the couch on which Lena had slept to the door leading to the balcony. When Ivan Antonovich entered his flat the tables were laid, and this change eased his memories of the last hours she had spent in this room.

She had died in hospital, but Ivan Antonovich had had her body brought home, despite the protests of Katya and her husband, who had insisted it would be much simpler to bury her from the hospital morgue. True, it had cost Ivan Antonovich great effort to have the body transferred, but he did not regret it. He had his own convictions in the matter. He felt Lena had a right to spend her last two days in the home she had lived in for twenty years. Not only was it her right—it was the last thing he could do for her, his wife and the mother of his son. She had never liked what she called this "match-box" of a flat with its connecting rooms and a kitchen so tiny that she never got enough air. Yet everything here, from the curtains across the hat-and-coat stand to her son whose head now reached almost to the chandelier, was taken care of by her. Surely the labour of twenty years in this flat entitled her to spend her last

two days at rest in it, to take her leave of it, if with closed eyes and stilled heart. These walls had heard her voice and laughter. Rare laughter to be sure, so rare in fact that Ivan Antonovich could not remember the last time he had heard it. Her tears were the only thing these walls had never seen. For twenty years they had lived here without rows or serious disagreement. That, perhaps, was one of the reasons why their life together had seemed so short.

During her long and painful illness, Ivan Antonovich had often felt that her end was at hand, yet now, as he entered the room and saw the spread tables, he had difficulty in controlling his emotions. It took him a long time to remove his hat and gloves, so long that Lev Arkadievich came out to him and said:

"We're waiting for you."

They went to the table together and Ivan Antonovich waved his hand, inviting the guests to take their places. Instantly there was movement, a scraping of chairs, a hum of conversation. Senya Gilchevsky even told a jolly little story about how the husband of an actress swallowed a bone at her funeral feast and "the *host* almost gave up the *ghost*". Ivan Antonovich was shocked by Senya's crude levity.

I was right, he said to himself, thinking of how opposed he had been to holding a funeral feast. He felt there was something indecent in this old Russian tradition. On the table where his wife's body had been laid out they would now put vodka and salad, and people who were not his intimates would eat and drink and say nice things about the deceased and praise their own wives. When they had drunk too much they would begin telling dirty jokes and gossipping about their colleagues at work. No, no! He could not permit this!

But Lydia Savvishna, a skinny little old woman who lived next door and had sometimes helped Lena with the housework, urged him to observe the tradition, said it was not Christian to ignore it; besides it would be too hard for him to go back home alone, without his friends. Katya also insisted on it and he gave in. He gave money to the old women and they arranged everything without his participation.

He felt better when he was sitting at the table and looking round at the people gathered there, when he saw that things were much the same as they would have been if Lena had been hostess. It was so much like the raro occasions on which they had entertained, for their entertaining had been as modest as their living. They had few friends and those they had were like themselves. They did not dance or sing or get drunk. They gathered quietly, quietly ate and drank, and as quietly went home at twelve o'clock. Why were they like that? Ivan Antonovich sometimes asked himself this question but could not find the answer. Perhaps because he and Lena had married late in life, and their friends had reached the age of dignity and discretion.

There were only two or three of their old friends and they were at the table. Fedya Vekshin, a classmate at the Polytechnical Institute, formerly a gay and witty fellow, now stout, phlegmatic, with a fleshy nose and a growing bald spot; his wife, a weak and ailing woman who worked for the Labour Commission; Andrei Olkhovsky, who had been a member of the staff of their Institute, but on losing an arm in the war had changed his profession to journalism. Olkhovsky and his wife were always included in the list of those invited. So was Ivan Antonovich's chief, Lev Arkadievich Mezentsev, Ph. D., who had achieved eminence in his profession. The rest of the people at the table were sometimes invited, sometimes not. Lena's sister Maria Vassilievna lived in Voronezh and so they did not see each other often although Ivan Antonovich was fond of her husband, Vyacheslav, an architect. He could not say the same of Katya's husband, Grigori Maximovich, whom they saw frequently.

That completed the roll of those at the table—excepting for Gilchevsky and Rosa. Senya Gilchevsky had never before been invited to their house and was present this time only because, as chairman of the Trade Union organisation in their Institute, he had helped make arrangements for the funeral. Rosa had only lately begun coming to their home and Ivan Antonovich reserved his opinion of her.

Their friends were few and they met rarely and they did not get drunk or sing songs, but they did enjoy their food. Lena had been a good cook, capable of concocting

delicious pies and salads even during the war and for some time after, when food was rationed.

When all of them were seated, Mezentsev, as a widower who knew what it meant to be deprived of one's life-companion, got up, filled his glass to the brim, and spoke in a low husky voice, weighing every word, as he did when reporting on the work of his department to the State Commission.

"Friends," he said, and at the word there was a scraping of chairs as everybody got up. "Friends, let us drink to the memory of our much beloved Elena Vassilievna. Let us drink to her not as she was an hour ago when we lowered her with our own hands...." Before he had said where they lowered her Lydia Savvishna, who was sitting in the corner next to the door, covered her face with her apron, spilling her wine. Mezentsev threw a sidelong glance at the old lady and filled in his statement: "...not as she was an hour ago when with our own hands we lowered her into the grave, but..." turning to the picture of Lena on the wall, "...as we used to see her at this table—a happy, kind hostess. To the hostess of this house! May her memory live on in our hearts and within these walls! "

All emptied their glasses without clinking them, as custom required. Only Ivan Antonovich did not touch his glass, his thoughts were in confusion: a single word, a single gesture was enough to evoke memories of whole periods of his life. He started at the words "lowered her into the grave" and felt they were cruel and uncalled for. Mezentsev was known to have a cruel streak in him. In a fit of anger he could draw a red pencil through a blueprint which had taken the author a month or even two to make.

Hardness, or rather high-handedness, was expressed in his every feature. He was tall and of fine physique despite his having crossed the half-century mark; his eyebrows were black and his hair white, an impressive combination. His manners were graceful and he spoke in a thrilling bass voice, trying in all things to imitate Nikolai Pavlovsky, a professor of hydraulics at the Institute who had been a favourite with all the boys.

"Come, Ivan," he said to his friend, who was still standing lost in thought, his glass untouched. "Drink it down."

Ivan Antonovich felt an impulse to resist, he almost came out with, "I just can't, friends," but, not daring to oppose his chief, he drank the wine. Instantly a blissful warmth flowed through his body, his legs grew heavy, there was a pounding inside his head, the hum of general conversation became more distinct and he said to himself he had done right in agreeing to hold this funeral feast.

"Eat something, eat something, Ivan Antonovich," said Lydia Savvishna, fussing over him. She took his plate and put some salad and salmon on it. "Try it. The salad's not bad, it has fresh cucumbers in it but I didn't cut them up fine enough."

"Excellent salad," put in Andrei Olkhovsky. "To be sure, it can't be compared to what Elena Vassilievna used to make. I hope you won't take offence, Lydia Savvishna."

"Not I, not I," said the old lady in a sing-song voice. "Everybody knows what a good cook Lena was. If guests came unexpected, first thing I'd run to her and she'd tell me what to make and how to do it and she'd lend a hand and give me some flour if she had it."

"I was in Hungary last year," said Lev Arkadievich in his resounding bass. "The Hungarians are famous for their cookery, it's considered among the best in Europe. Salad à la Danube, salad Balatonsky, pullets in red wine. Marvellous dishes! But I swear Elena Vassilievna turned out even better food."

In one voice everybody began praising Lena as a cook, as if that was her only virtue—her ability to satisfy their appetites. Nobody spoke of her human qualities.

This was the most trying hour of the evening, and Ivan Antonovich, mellow after the first glass of wine, exhausted by sleepless nights, had difficulty in sitting through it.

Fortunately it did not take long for the guests to eat and drink their fill, and this done, they departed for their homes.

6

Without waiting for the tables to be cleared, Ivan Antonovich lay down on the day-bed in the living-room.

Lydia Savvishna washed the dishes in the kitchen, Rosa dried them, Misha removed the wine glasses and empty bottles from the table.

Ivan Antonovich must have dozed off for he did not hear the old woman go out when she had finished the dishes, nor Misha carry out the kitchen table, nor Rosa sweep the floor and tidy up the room. Suddenly he was aware of lowered voices in the hall and lifted his head. His son came in wearing a mackintosh.

"Don't get up, dad; I'll see Rosa home and be back directly."

"Very well," said his father, getting up to say goodbye to Rosa.

She was standing in front of the looking-glass powdering her nose as fastidiously as if executing a responsible task. As Ivan Antonovich watched her he could not help comparing her with Lena. Lena was more refined, he thought. And more ... what shall I say? ... romantic, I guess. When I first met her she still wore her hair in plaits. Rosa was what her contemporaries called "a sports type": tall and thin with short-cropped hair which she bleached to a golden glow; she never wore gloves and when listening to somebody would toss back her head and say in a tone of half-surprise, half-perplexity: "Think of that! "

Her tallness made people think she was more than her twenty years. Misha is a match for her, thought Ivan Antonovich. Look how much taller than his father he is!

Not so many days before this Ivan Antonovich had arrived at the hospital when the patients were away having treatment. He sat down in the hall outside Lena's ward and picked up a magazine stained and torn by the many patients who had leafed through it. Chary as he was of much-handled objects, his eye was caught by an article written by an anthropologist asserting that with each generation human beings are growing bigger and maturing earlier. This referred especially to women, who were not only quickly overtaking men in size but were acquiring physical toughness as well. Men's frames, too, were developing in size and strength. One of the author's proofs of this was that not a single suit of armour preserved in museums could be donned by a modern man of average size. No suit of armour will fit those two,

thought Ivan Antonovich a little sardonically, having Rosa and Misha in mind.

Aware that she was being observed, Rosa put away her compact and turned to Ivan Antonovich with a smile.

"Goodbye."

"Goodbye." Ivan Antonovich made a gallant bow.

The lock of the door clicked, the door slammed and he was alone. All alone.

Loath to enter the living-room, he paced the hall and opened the door of Misha's room. The only light in it was that of a desk lamp. On the divan was a rose-coloured pillow matching the cover. An ash tray beside the pillow held the wrappers of chocolates called "Mask", evidently Rosa's favourite.

I never knew Lena's preference in chocolates, thought Ivan Antonovich. Indeed he hardly knew her preference in anything. Ah, yes; in her youth she had enjoyed going to the pictures, but Ivan Antonovich could not bear the stuffiness of cinema theatres and the flat tricks with which film producers tried to get a laugh out of audiences. He was bored to death by the comedies she would laugh at for two hours at a stretch. When the baby came they stopped going to the pictures altogether. From time to time, it was true, she would come to him and say she had heard such-and-such a film was making a hit and couldn't he get tickets for it, but soon she stopped even that; if they went to the pictures once or twice a year they were doing well.

Misha seemed to know what his Rosa liked.

While Lena was in hospital Rosa became a frequent visitor in their home. She soon left her stamp on Misha's room. Not that she touched it with her own hands—no indeed! But Misha fulfilled all her wishes. Old photographs of his grandmother (Lena's mother, who had been an actress) were replaced on his walls by coloured photographs of half-naked girls and young men—Olympic champions, perhaps, or stars from French and Italian films. The room even smelled of the scent Rosa used.

Ivan Antonovich could not bear this pungent scent. He opened the window, put out the lamp and left the room. Still unable to enter the living-room where Lena's picture was hanging, he drifted into the kitchen. The

kitchen, which Lena had hated because it was so small and because she had to spend so much time at the stove and sink, was full of freshly washed dishes. The table had piles of plates on it, and wine glasses that stood as brittle on their stems as the tulips on Lena's grave.

Through the open window came the swishing of tyres on asphalt and the tap-tap of women's heels. These sounds and the fresh air soothed his nerves. He sank down on a stool fitted between the table and ice-box. This made him recall another warm May evening when, after he defended his Candidate's thesis, they had invited some of his friends to supper: Mezentsev and his late wife, Fedya Vekshin, Prof. Gorokhovsky of the Building Institute, and a few others. What high spirits he and Lena had been in after the guests had gone home and they retired to the kitchen! While Lena washed the dishes he had sat on this very stool between table and ice-box and the two of them had dreamed aloud to the steady gurgling of the water in the sink. The achieving of his Candidate's degree had been a mutual achievement because Lena had taken an active part in it by drawing charts and pasting them into the text, editing and typing out what he wrote, checking on figures and quotations. Both of them considered a Candidate's degree was just a step to a Ph. D. and that in another two or three years he would achieve that. And then ... perhaps ... a few more steps would lead him to membership in the Academy of Sciences.

The first step had been taken, but he lacked the strength to follow it up. The strength or the courage, he could not say which. Certainly he was not driven by any considerations of money or ambition, for the holding of a Candidate's degree had added nothing to his purse or his prestige.

7

The kitchen smelt of onion and herring. But it was not so much these smells as the bitterness of his memories that made it impossible for him to go on sitting on the stool between table and ice-box. With one hand on the table, the other on the ice-box, he drew himself to

his feet. In doing so he touched the plug to which the radio was attached—Lena had enjoyed listening to music while she worked.

He touched the plug, and sounds came over the radio. By turning the dial he caught a familiar Tchaikovsky theme—was it from the 5th or the 6th Symphony? The last time he had heard these symphonies was after the war, when conductor Konstantin Ivanov was just coming to fame. In those days Lena dragged him with her to almost every concert of the Philharmonic Society. "Drag" was hardly the word; himself a native of Leningrad he was proud of the city and its orchestra and he gladly attended these concerts. They listened to all of Tchaikovsky's symphonies and a few of Mozart's and Beethoven's. Beethoven did not touch him; he failed to detect the composer's warmth and humanity. But he loved Tchaikovsky's music, especially his minor melodies and the folk themes he wove into his symphonies. In one of the programme notes he read that in using folk themes the composer seemed to say: When you are lonely or bowed down by grief, turn to the people, give of yourself to others.

Well might a man like Tchaikovsky say such a thing, thought Ivan Antonovich. In his own lifetime his music was played in many countries, and now that we have the radio hardly an hour goes by without bringing some Tchaikovsky strain through the ether. But a person like Lena—didn't she give of herself to others? And who will remember her? Her husband and her son. Actually they were objects of her self-sacrifice. They and that leering idol—the kitchen.

Static crackled in the radio and the music faded out. Try as he might Ivan Antonovich could not bring it back. Impatiently he pulled out the plug—pulled it out with such vengeance that he nearly knocked down the radio. He pushed it back in place and wiped the dust off with his hand. It was an old "Record" they had bought just after the war when they had moved into this flat. He and Lena discussed the necessity of buying a new one so often that if all their talk had been taken down it would make a formidable volume. The gist of it was that the radio was old, was always getting out of order and it was time to throw it away and buy a new one. The same

words were repeated every time it went dead. On such occasions Lena would call Misha into the kitchen and say: "Take out that box and throw it in the dust bin! " and Misha would reply, "Why, mum? I'll mend it, probably the fuse has just blown." And he would take it into his room and begin fussing with it. There his father would find him when he came home. He would wash his hands, change into his pyjamas and join in the fun. They might be at it till midnight, and Lena would mutter as she passed the door, "Poor things, can't even afford a new radio! Or perpahs you have nothing better to do with your time?" It would end in Ivan Antonovich's wrapping up the radio in a table-cloth and taking it to a work-shop to be mended on his next day off.

This went on from year to year. The last decision was that when they bought themselves a little place in the country the old "Record" would go there and they would buy a new one for the flat.

Damn! And we never got round to it, thought Ivan Antonovich as he went into the living-room.

The first thing his eye fell on was Lena's picture. She had disliked being photographed and he could not remember exactly when this picture, which he had chosen to be enlarged, was taken. He believed it was at that period of their marriage, when Misha was big enough to be left with his grandmother while they took a little holiday at Plyoss, on the Volga. It was a wonderful summer, hot and sunny, with frequent thunderstorms and an abundance of wild berries and mushrooms growing at the edge of the birch woods that crowned the steep Volga bank. Lena was as carefree as a child. She could spend hours searching for wild strawberries in the tall grass, and when she had eaten her fill would throw herself on the ground and squint up at the sun, saying ecstatically, "How wonderful! Isn't it wonderful, Vanya? " "Very nice indeed." Seeing that his reserve irritated her, he would sit down beside her and stroke her hair and say "It's marvellous, darling, really marvellous. But hadn't you better get up? The grass is damp." She would get up and they would walk along in silence, aware of the Volga shimmering through the birches growing along the bank. "You *are* a bore, Vanya! " she would say casually

running ahead of him, down the steep path leading to the water.

That summer an actor who was an old friend of her mother's had taken her picture and sent it to her in the autumn. They had been delighted to have this memento of their wonderful summer. Lena was smiling and screwing up her eyes against the sun, which fell full on her right cheek. But now when Ivan Antonovich looked at the picture her smile and narrowed eyes seemed to be saying: You *are* a bore, Vanya.

He blinked and his lips moved as if trying to justify himself in the eyes of the deceased, but instead he just shrugged his shoulders helplessly and said, "I'm sorry, Lena."

With an old man's heavy gait he shuffled over to the corner by the window and sank into the armchair. She had sat in this chair in the evening, busy with some sort of hand work.

Ivan Antonovich picked up a newspaper lying on a little table. He had spent the last few days shuttling between notorial and registration offices (institutions that show little mercy on the living in their eagerness to document the dead). For a week or more he had not looked at a newspaper and had no idea of what was going on in the world. Now he picked it up not to read, such a thing was beyond his strength, merely to re-establish contact with the surrounding world; to assure himself it still existed. But in picking up the paper he uncovered a heap of snapshots of Lena that his brother-in-law Vyacheslav had asked for. Vyacheslav had a friend in Voronezh who was a sculptor and who, he hoped, would design a tombstone with her profile on it in bas-relief. Evidently, the guests at the funeral supper had been looking through them.

Ivan Antonovich put down the paper and began going through the photographs for the twentieth time. Many of them were cracked and yellow with age but they were the only means he had of gazing again at the familiar features.

Misha and Maria Vassilievna insisted that he must have one of Lena's earliest pictures enlarged for the family and the sculptor. In the one they chose she was not more than eighteen. Her thick hair was in plaits, the gaze

of her enormous eyes was tranquil. She looked like a Madonna. The picture was, in addition to everything else, well executed and this was another reason why Misha and Maria Vassilievna had selected it. But Ivan Antonovich preferred the one taken on the Volga. Now as he sat in the armchair and gazed at the tranquil face of the young girl he admitted with a sorrow verging on despair that he did not want this picture enlarged because he had never known this Lena—a Lena untouched by illness, undisturbed by doubts. It made him jealous. Of whom? He did not know.

He had the Volga picture enlarged. She was still pretty, but thirty was not eighteen. The perfect oval of her face was marred, wrinkles had appeared on her forehead and at the corners of her mouth, her expression was different. There was something new about her that at first he could not define. When he had discovered the photograph a week or so before, he had seen in it only the carefree joy of that delightful summer. But when he had entered the room just now and looked at it more attentively he had read reproof in her eyes.

8

For almost two hours he sat there in a sort of trance, looking through the pictures. Each of them conjured up the memory of an eventful day in their lives: a trip to the country, a holiday or anniversary. There he sat, identifying each of them—where was this taken? when? on what occasion?

It grew late and his eyes closed with weariness. Time to go to bed, but his son had not yet come home and he could not bear to retire without seeing him.

Suddenly he remembered he was to go back to work the next day and that after his week's absence his colleagues would cast curious glances at him, seeking changes. He wished to thwart them. Lena had always seen to it that he was neat and well groomed. He put down the pictures and went to the wardrobe to make sure he had a clean shirt. It was a big three-door wardrobe and in some trepidation he opened the door of the section where his suits and white shirts hung. He caught

a whiff of the scent Lena had used and he saw her winter coat—a Bulgarian coat of synthetic fur with a white collar—hanging with her frocks in the next section. There were only five frocks and she had worn them for so many years he knew every stitch, every mend in each of them. The thoughts they evoked brought a lump to his throat and he knew he lacked the courage to rummage among such painful memories. He decided to wear a coloured rather than a white shirt, one of those that were sent to the laundry. He shut the door and opened one of the drawers in which their linen was laid. He found a shirt and took it out. The collar and cuffs were badly ironed but he did not look for another, knowing that Lena always re-ironed the collars and cuffs of shirts that came from the laundry. He put the shirt on the table but could not drag himself away from the wardrobe.

He saw a pile of his wife's underwear. She had washed it and put it here before she went to hospital. Ivan Antonovich touched it, and as if the contact robbed him of reason, he pulled the drawer out convulsively, it must have got stuck, he jerked it harder and out it flew, spilling the things all over the floor. As he bent down to pick them up his eye was caught by something violet-blue. He thought at first it was her weeding-dress, which had been white for the wedding and then been dyed. Lena had worn it up to the time of Misha's birth.

He picked it up and it turned out to be a veil. The mauve veil she had asked him to tie round her head.

The veil was neatly wound up and the ends knotted and when Ivan Antonovich picked it up he felt something hard and square inside. The first thought that came into his mind was that she had tied up war-loan certificates in the veil, and he was about to put the veil back in the cupboard but began mechanically to undo the knot. When he had unwound the stuff which had the clinging quality of a cobweb, he found himself with a book in his hand—a little thin book the width of his palm with a dark-green cover worn down in spots to the white threads of the fabric. His mother, who had lived in Leningrad and who had died during the blockade, had owned a prayer-book with just such a dark-green cover. Ivan Antonovich remembered her wrapping it in a bit of

cloth and hiding it behind the dishes in the cupboard so that his father would not see it. Anton Makarovich, his father, was a coupler working at the Leningrad junction of the Finnish Railway. He was an atheist, did not go to church himself and did not allow his children to do so. His wife's piety was the cause of many a conflict between them. Anton Makarovich, formerly a peasant from the Novgorod district, was proud of being a workingman. He did not miss a single meeting of railway workers and read their newspaper daily. He was a quiet sociable man, liked by his colleagues and neighbours alike. A coupler among railwaymen is like a sapper among infantrymen—he can only err once. Anton Makarovich made this one error. It happened in the bitter-cold winter of 1939; he slipped as he was coupling coaches in the middle of the night and fell under the wheels.

As these memories flashed through his mind, Ivan Antonovich thought his mother might have sent Lena her prayer-book during the war as a sort of blessing. The idea pleased him, but a second glance at the book showed him the word Notebook woven into the scrolls and flourishes of the cover.

Notebook? he muttered in bewilderment, turning it over in his hands. A ribbon was tied round it with a neatness characteristic of Lena. He pulled one end of the bow and let the ribbon drop to the floor as he opened the book. The narrow pages were covered with her handwriting: yes, there could be no doubt but that it was hers; here she had written hurriedly in pencil, there carefully in ink. There were numbers and dates. What was it? A diary? A diary she had kept before her marriage?

9

Ah, so that's why she wanted me to find that veil. Had she been afraid Katya would go through her things and find her diary? Perish the thought! Perhaps she wanted me to read it. She was not a secretive soul, but a woman cannot tell her husband everything. There are things one is ashamed to confide even to those who are nearest and dearest. Ashamed, or perhaps simply reluc-

tant, and so one keeps postponing the moment. That is if the matter is not kept a dark secret. Ivan Antonovich opened the book at random.

"He did not promise to marry me. He had a wife. Nor did he give me presents or do anything to humiliate me." The next few words were crossed out. "He was generous with me. Generous with what he had in abundance: love."

Generous with love? The sweat broke out on Ivan Antonovich's brow. Could she have been writing about me? But I had no wife. Then who was this "he"? Let's see, when did she write it? He wiped his brow, and without bothering to pick up the underwear, walked away from the wardrobe. Eager as he was to sit down there and then in the armchair and read—read and read until he found the answer to all the questions swarming in his mind—he resisted the temptation. This, to be sure, required no great effort on his part for he was one of those who consider excess emotion and excitement harmful: everything in its proper time and place! The more important the matter in hand, the more binding the rule. Accordingly, Ivan Antonovich put the diary on the table beside his day-bed, opened the drawer in which the bedding was put away, made his bed, donned his pyjamas, lighted the night-lamp, exchanged the glasses he was wearing for reading glasses, went to the window, drew the curtains, got into bed, fluffed up his pillow, and picked up the diary.

On the first page was a time-table of lectures that looked like the multiplication-table printed on the back of school notebooks. In other words, said Ivan Antonovich to himself, the diary was written when Lena was a student of the Stroganov Institute of Applied Arts. He glanced through the list: "Painting", "Sculpture", "Studio-hours". The list told him nothing: these subjects might have been given in the third as well as the first year of study. Not so with his institute, where everything was presented in an order determined by scientific progression: first physics, geodesy and geology, with such practical subjects as reinforced concrete and power plants introduced only in the last years. Practical work followed the same principle: you turned the screws of geodetic instruments under the watchful eye of Assistant Lutz

and attended lectures on the subject by Prof. Ditz. Only after hearing the course read by eminent hydrologist Pavlovsky could you take the special course offered by Chertousov, where you got your first whiff of hydrodynamics with all its complicated mathematics, a science that never stood you in good stead in after years.

"Hm," sighed Ivan Antonovich as he recalled how he had sweated under the stern tutelage of Ditz and Lutz. Now he probably knew no less than they. These legs that refused to get warm no matter how many blankets he put over them—these same legs had carried him over almost every inch of all the lands to be inundated for the great hydro-electric plants that were built after the war. Up and down, back and forth he had tramped studying, measuring, and only then making his blueprints.

Hm. Lutz ... Ditz; Ditz ... Lutz.... He turned the page. On the back—a time-table of state exams. So the diary relates to 1935, he concluded. The year before we were married. His good sense prevented him from becoming agitated by the thought: no one can foresee what will happen to him in a year's time.

As he leafed through the book he remarked to himself that art students had to take state exams and write a thesis, while they, students of the Polytechnical Institute, had only to submit graduation theses.

He was in no hurry; no one would take this diary away from him. But he decided to glance through it quickly first for a general idea of what it contained, then read it from cover to cover at his leisure. And so he rapidly turned the pages to discover when he (not he, Ivan Antonovich, but that other he who was so bountiful with his love) first entered her life.

He soon found the place and the light dawned on him as he read the paragraphs over and over again:

"28 November. Our house has become a shambles. Yesterday Maria brought home a cute little student and announced he was her husband. How do you like that? —Katya with a new-born babe and now these two! Mum and dad gave up their room to them and the three of us, plus Marquis, slept in the kitchen. Today mum went to N. K. and asked the dear old thing (I hope to God she never sees this diary! She doesn't consider

herself old) to take me in for a while. I welcomed the chance. Pillow and books in a bundle, and off I went to Sivtsev Vrazhek Street. I found N. K. older and preachier than ever, but she keeps her "salon" going as in her youth—always people in the evening. Actresses and actors of a former day with their last few strands of hair carefully plastered over their bald spots. I don't know any of them. V. V. is the only famous one among them. What a cavalier he is! 'Your niece, N. K.? Allow me to kiss your hand, my dear. Lena? Delighted.' Almost funny. He's quite different in the films. I suppose his manners come from playing White Guard officers so often. I must admit I enjoyed it."

Hm. Enjoyed it. Ivan Antonovich took off his glasses and rubbed the deep cavities of his eye sockets. He remembered Lena's having told him she had lived with her mother's friend, the well-known actress Nina Konstantinovna Osmanova, at one time. Undoubtedly N. K. stood for this same Nina Konstantinovna, the "dear old thing". She had been to his and Lena's wedding. He remembered her as an imposing figure sitting at the table—plump, white-haired, with a lace scarf on her shoulders—and interrupting the noisy young people from time to time to read them an edifying little lecture. None of the guests were as famous as she, nor as generous. She presented the newly-married couple with an expensive set of silverware for twelve persons. They had used it all their married life and guests had always marvelled: how had they come into possession of this elegant pre-revolutionary silver? Lena took pride in explaining. During the war when Lena had been in dire circumstances, Ivan Antonovich, who was in the Far North at the time, wrote and told her to sell the silver—they would replace it when times were better—but Lena refused to.

It was with these knives and forks the guests had eaten today.

Ivan Antonovich had visited Nina Konstantinovna after their marriage, when Lena tried to introduce him into "society". Now he could not even remember which house on Sivtsev Vrazhek Street she had lived in; he did remember, however, that there had been an over-abundance of everything—furniture, pictures and food. He had been overwhelmed by this over-abundance as well as by

the actress' tendency to moralise. As a result he ate nothing, twisted the fringe of the table-cloth in his fingers and, worst of all, answered the actress' questions in the halting, wooden language of a country bumpkin. Three days or so after their visit Lena remarked at supper, "I called up Nina Konstantinovna today." "Well?" asked Ivan Antonovich, missing the implications of her enigmatic smile. "You didn't make much of an impression on her," was all she said. He let the matter drop at this, but never again did he feel the slightest inclination to return to the house on Sivtsev Vrazhek Street.

Now the recollection of that visit filled him with resentment. "Didn't make much of an impression on her! I should think not! Her 'salon'! High society!" And he, a young engineer in mended boots and uppressed trousers, speaking the graceless language inherited from his taciturn railwayman of a father!

10

Long entries followed that meant little to him. Descriptions of evenings at the Theatre Club, of plays seen and discussions about them.

"I've never been to the theatre so often in my life. I used to wonder why mother was so mad about the stage—thought she was a little cracked. She played in Tartuffe when her children were grown up. It was only my love for V. V. that opened my eyes to the beauty and romance of the theatre."

The entries gave a detailed account of who played what parts in plays, and of opinions expressed about them privately and in public. She wrote out the names of some actors in full, designated others with initials. Some of the names were famous.

"Saw Meyerhold today. Looks like Beethoven with his shaggy head and bulging brow and impenetrable look." And then: "K. played the part of Varvara in *The Storm.* Funny to see your own sister as a matchmaker."

The initials that occurred most frequently were V. V. "V. V. came up to me after the play. He was in a hurry, hadn't even taken off his make-up. 'How was I tonight?'

he asked. 'Marvellous! ' 'That's because you inspired me. I kept watching you. You were sitting in the fourth row. I felt your presence.' Could this be the beginning? ..."

"V. V. dropped in tonight. The old dear wasn't home. He made advances. 'Forgive me! Forgive me! ' Kept glancing in the direction of the kitchen to make sure the maid wasn't looking."

As he read, Ivan Antonovich made painful efforts to guess who V. V. could have been. He went over the names of all the actors he knew, irritated with himself for knowing so few.

"Could it have been Vassili Vassilievich Zasekin? Hardly. He had joined the troupe of a theatre in Novosibirsk by that time. Victor Vitkovsky? He didn't appear in films before the war. Could it have been Vladislav Vladimirovich Mtsensky? " Ivan Antonovich lifted himself off the pillow, so struck was he by the certainty he had made the right guess. Why had he not thought of it before? Of course it was Mtsensky!

Mtsensky was an actor of the same theatre in which Osmanova had acted until her retirement. He was, in fact, her pupil and one in whom she took great pride. He took leading parts in plays and films—was, in fact, at the height of his fame at that time.

In a confiding moment Lena once told him that Mtsensky had frequently visited Nina Konstantinovna. He was extremely handsome, she said, adding with a shy smile, that he had not been indifferent to her. With the reserve he cultivated, Ivan Antonovich did not pursue the subject and Lena volunteered no further information.

Many years after this conversation, when the war was over, he met Mtsensky. It was at an Institute celebration of one of the holidays—May First or Victory Day? —he did not remember. They used to have a get-together for all these holidays. Although the buildings of the Institute to which he was attached were scattered throughout the city, the main building was on Bauman Street and it was there all social gatherings were held. As usual the evening began with a meeting at which the achievements of the Institute were reviewed. This was followed by an entertainment, and this by a supper. Lena did not enjoy such festivities and as a rule remained at home. One glance at an invitation, and she would say, "Go alone if you like; I

shan't go." This time she did go. Perhaps she felt a need of diversion, or perhaps she had read the name of Mtsensky in the list of actors who would supply the entertainment. Be that as it may, she bought herself a new dress and went to the hairdresser's and was exceptionally pretty and lively that evening.

Only now did Ivan Antonovich realise she had set out for a rendezvous with her youth that evening.

The meeting was a bore and so was the entertainment. On such occasions the Philharmonic Society usually supplied singers and actors whose popularity was on the wane. But Senya Gilchevsky, who had just been elected chairman of the Trade Union organisation, succeeded in adding a few famous names to the list of performers sent by the Philharmonic. One of them was Vladislav Vladimirovich Mtsensky, who told the audience some of his experiences during the shooting of films. This was followed by a showing of excerpts from these films, none of which were particularly interesting, but fame is fame; the Philharmonic performers were allowed to leave when they had said their pieces, but Senya pressed Mtsensky to stay and have supper with them.

At that time the Volga-Don power plant was about to be launched, plants in Kuibyshev and Stalingrad were well under way, and the Institute had received a big bonus for its participation in this work. And so a bountiful feast was spread that evening. When all had partaken of it, Mtsensky was asked to recite. The guests supported the request with calls of "Do! Do! " Ivan Antonovich seemed to remember that Lena had clapped her hands in eager anticipation and Vladislav Vladimirovich, turning at the sound, noticed her. He got up, tall and round-shouldered, and instantly there was silence.

"I will recite one of Turgenev's *Poems in Prose:* 'How Fresh, How Lovely Were the Roses.'" He touched his bow tie, cleared his throat and, clasping his hands in front of him, began in a low, vibrant voice. It was less a recitation than a reminiscence spoken by one who is old and weary: "*Winter has come; frost has furred the window-panes; a single taper lights the dusky room....*"

Not a sound broke the silence; not a whisper, not the creak of a chair, not the click of a fork on china. All were listening with bated breath. Mtsensky was inspired

by a sense of oneness with his audience—or perhaps he was indulging in a real reminiscence. His voice rose and fell in subtle modulations. It was bright and clear, when he spoke of his youth: "*Two fair heads, tenderly inclined, are turned to me...*" and when he came to the refrain: "*How fresh, how lovely were the roses!* " he pronounced it distinctly. But when he came to the end: "*The taper flickers and goes out.... I am cold.... I tremble.... All are dead ... all ... all ...*" his voice was scarcely audible. He bowed his head and his great frame seemed to shrink. He was about to sit down when the audience came out of the spell and broke into wild applause, women jumped up and went with their wine glasses to drink to his health, even Lev Ardadievich strode over to thank the actor.

"Bravo, bravo! " cried Lena and, seizing Ivan Antonovich by the hand, drew him after her. "Come, Vanya, I want you to meet him."

Mtsensky noticed her at once and rose to meet her. "Lena! What are you doing here? " He seized her by the arm and drew her to him as if to kiss her but was deterred by the sight of her companion.

"I want you to meet my husband, Vladislav Vladimirovich," said Lena, freeing her arm from his grasp.

"A pleasure," and the two men shook hands. This was the whole extent of their acquaintanceship. No other word was exchanged between them. Lena immediately began asking Mtsensky about their mutual friends and he asked her about her mother. Lena told him she had died and they sighed and repeated the usual platitudes, and when the women who had surrounded the actor drifted away, leaving the three of them alone, Lena proposed toasting their reunion and friendship. Mtsensky poured out cognac and Lena drained her glass, a thing she rarely did.

"There was a time, Vladislav Vladimirovich," began Lena, looking at him with sympathy and compassion, "when you and I loved each other."

Mtsensky started and lowered his glass.

"Well, now," he murmured cautiously, "that is hardly the word for it. There was a certain infatuation..."

She smiled at his discomfort and wished to chide him for his pusillanimity.

"No, it was love," she insisted. "Why do you deny it, Vladislav Vladimirovich?"

Not a nerve in Ivan Antonovich's body tingled as he listened. His mind was too clouded with wine for any strong reaction. But the words "a certain infatuation" kept ringing in his ears. Certain to whom? Just the two of them? He, her husband, certainly knew nothing of it. He studied the actor hostilely. If a few moments before, as he had recited *How Fresh, How Lovely Were the Roses...*, Ivan Antonovich had found him tall and handsome, he now saw in him only a sadly shrivelled old man with the ravages of drink evident on his wrinkled cheeks and in his lustreless eyes. The lapels of his tuxedo showed a drift of powder or dandruff. His hair would not bear looking at; its thin strands were carefully combed over an expanding bald spot and were dyed the colour of one of those old brass pans Russian women used to make jam in. A man with dyed hair—ugh! he said to himself. People used to think grey hair added dignity to a person's appearance. Efforts to look young only inspire contempt.

His dyed hair was revolting indeed, but how much more revolting was that unveiled declaration made here in public, among his colleagues, who had always looked upon him and Lena as the epitome of respectability and conjugal devotion.

Ivan Antonovich could not stand it. He turned and walked away. He would have left the gathering but for this sense of respectability he so deeply revered. He returned to his seat as if nothing had happened. And when Lena came back a few minutes later there was nothing in his behaviour that betrayed his indignation. He held her chair for her as she sat down and, to emphasise his politeness, offered her some wine.

"No, darling," she said, holding her hand over her glass. "My head's spinning as it is. If you're not angry with me, take my arm and see me home."

That is what he did. He took her arm and, without saying goodbye to anybody, they went out. As they walked to the Metro Lena tried to make him talk. "Don't you think Vladislav Vladimirovich read that Turgenev beautifully?" He made no reply, did not even squeeze a little "yes" through locked teeth, did not even

nod. She was undaunted. "How old he looks! I wouldn't have recognised him had I met him in the street." When this, too, went unremarked, she burst out in exasperation, "What cowards you men are! Did you notice how frightened he looked when I insisted it was love? "

It was difficult for Ivan Antonovich to remain silent after these words, but he did. He was silent all the way home. He was silent when they got home. He was silent as they had tea and went to bed. Lena made no further attempt to force him to speak; she knew her husband and his principles only too well. One of his principal principles was to uphold his masculine pride. And one of the means of upholding his masculine pride was never to ask his wife about her past, and never to insult her and himself by harbouring suspicions. And although he felt very angry all the way home and while they were drinking tea and going to bed, and although he was consumed with the desire to find out from his wife all about her relations with Mtsensky, he remained true to this principle. The effort it cost him was expressed by his silence, his exaggerated courtesy, and the mask of impenetrability he wore.

Lena was aware of all this. She knew it was not easy for him, that he was suffering, and she longed to have him give vent to his feelings for once, to shout at her if it would do him any good. But Ivan Antonovich showed a face as cold and smooth as a cobble-stone.

This depressed her.

She made up her couch for the night, climbed between the sheets, switched off the light and murmured with a sigh, "To think of all the tortures I went through because of that henna-haired hobgoblin! "

11

Now that he knew what the initials V. V. stood for, Ivan Antonovich leafed hurriedly through the diary in search of bits where these initials occurred. They occurred, he discovered, on almost every page, but most of the entries were too brief and non-committal to satisfy his curiosity. At last he came upon a long and revealing one.

"Dec. 2. The old dear seems to have guessed that I have a weakness for V. V. He did not come for three days, at the end of which I was nearly crazy. I rushed home from the Institute yesterday and while I was having my dinner N. K. said casually, 'V. V. rang. He's writing an article for one of the theatre magazines and needs Stanislavsky's book. I wonder if you'd mind taking it to him.' 'Let him come for it himself if he needs it.' 'He's in the country, dear, and doesn't want to waste the time it would take to come to town. I think the excursion would do you good, you seem to be sick and tired of everything.' Sick and tired I certainly was! I almost stuck out my tongue at the old hypocrite. But I only shrugged my shoulders as if it was all the same to me, while in my heart of hearts I was overjoyed.

"While I was dressing I caught sight of my hands and was horrified. I rushed off for a manicure and the girl who gave it to me shook her head and said, 'Why do you bite your nails?' My nails! It's a marvel I don't bite my hands!

"It was almost dark by the time I got there. The path to the village was narrow and there were hardly any people in sight. I rang at the gate, a dog barked and a man's voice called out, 'Come in, come in! Back, Rex! Don't be afraid, he doesn't bite.' Very polite: 'Sorry. This way, please. How glad I am to see you! How is N. K.? Well? A remarkable woman!'

"His study. A couch, a tiled stove, an autographed photograph of Stanislavsky. A portrait (copy) of Strepetova in black, taking up the entire wall between the windows. A bear's skin on the floor beside the couch. Rex lying on it. A charming dog with dreamy eyes—a Kachalov-Yesenin dog.

"'Here's the book.' 'Thank you.' He put it on the edge of the table. He studied me attentively. 'Has anybody ever told you what beautifully shaped hands you have, Lena?' 'No.' 'What a pity! Young men are inclined to see the wrong things. You have lovely hands.' He took them. 'Oh, dear! They're like ice! Forgive me, I'll have tea ready in a moment.' The kitchen. Pots and pans, tea-cups, tea-kettle. 'I didn't put much sugar in your tea. Help yourself if you want more.' 'I don't like it sweet.' 'And who is the lucky gentleman?' 'I haven't

anybody.' 'Neither have I,' (said without a trace of humour). 'I have a wife and son, but nobody ever loved me really. Will you have some more? ' 'No, thanks.'

"Back to the tiled stove and crackling logs. 'Well, how do you feel now? Warmer? Here, let me feel your hands.' He drew me over.

"Absolute composure. Numbness of soul and body. I was dead.

"'Back, Rex! '

"Crackling logs. I was next to the stove, he—beside the table.

"'A magazine article—a trifle, really. In another ten years I mean to leave the stage and write my memoirs. Then the world will learn Stanislavsky was not the only one who made our theatre. True, he devised a system of acting. But I have had the experience. I want to write it in three volumes: the first about my work in the theatre, the second about my work in the films, the third about the great people I have known. I'm always invited to take part in entertainments given in the Kremlin. And I have recited for Gorky.'

"It was late and high time I went home, but I went on sitting there and listening to him. At last I pulled myself together and got up. 'I'll see you off,' he said and went into the next room to change his clothes.

"When he was gone I pressed my cheek against the warm tiles and thought: I can't go away. When he comes back I'll tell him I'm not leaving—I can't. This is where I belong. I'll take care of him, be his slave, a second Rex—anything to be near him!

"I don't remember how long I stood there. My heart was thumping so hard I thought he must hear it. My emotions were a mixture of horror, despair and hope. How could I go away alone ... in the cold and dark ... through the woods ... train whistles ... unknown faces....

"The clever dog looked at me without winking, without so much as twitching an ear. He understood.

"V. V. came back. 'Come along, I'm ready.'

"He understood nothing."

"Back, Rex! " "I'll not go away." Ivan Antonovich's lips moved as he repeated these words to himself. She

was a determined creature; with me, too. In fact it was her determination that made me marry her.

Ivan Antonovich put down the diary and lay for a minute or two with closed eyes, reviewing the past.

On graduating from the Institute he had been assigned a job working for the district branch of the Waterways Administration. The offices were in the basement of an old mansion on Liteiny Street in Leningrad and were so dark that they worked by electricity even at noonday. Many of his friends envied him for being able to remain in Leningrad at a job they thought interesting. What else could a man want? But he was dissatisfied. The work was too limited in scope. He drew plans of canal systems for the drying of peat bogs and of irrigation ditches for villages in Uzbekistan. Seen in retrospect the three years spent in that dark basement in Leningrad were the most unrewarding of his life. They left nothing for him to remember but Shura Cherepnina's love.

He had worked there two years when she put in an appearance. She was very young, very pretty, and a graduate of a technical college where she specialised in melioration. Like most pretty girls, she did not linger long in her mother's home; at nineteen she was married. Although Ivan Antonovich knew what women were in aid of, he nevertheless failed to hold out, fell victim to temptation and was swept off his feet by Shura. So much so, that he could not stop in time and the affair ended in a scandal. Shura left her husband. Ivan Antonovich was ready to do anything for her, even to marry her and bring her to his home on Zakharievskaya Street. But Shura objected. She preferred love on the shores of the sea near Peterhoff to love in the cramped quarters of a home shared with his father and brothers. Temporarily she went to live with her mother. At work she chirped and flitted about like a gay little bird, but when Ivan Antonovich saw her home in the evening she wept and reproached him. She taught him subtleties and wiles of love he had never dreamed of in all his twenty-six years.

Winter came. He ought to have rented a flat for them, but, intimidated by the thought of assuming the responsibilities of a married man and gnawed by jealousy, he kept temporising. It ended in Shura's "giving

him the gate" and marrying the head of the office, an engineer named Kugel who left his wife and two children for her.

She immediately put on flesh and fine chothes and was more irresistible than ever. It was daily torture for Ivan Antonovich to see her so happy and triumphant. He was seriously contemplating changing his job when, at a Moscow conference of engineers in his field, he met a former classmate, the good-hearted and practical-minded Fedya Vekshin. They hugged each other as classmates do who have not seen each other for a long time and Fedya, who was employed in one of the Moscow design institutes, asked him about Leningrad and their classmates. After the conference he invited Ivan to come along with him, eager to show off his young wife and new home.

They drank and talked and in one of those moments of frankness that Ivan Antonovich rarely allowed himself, he confided to Fedya his experience with Shura and the suffering her defection was causing him. "Look," said Fedya, "let's see if we can't get you a job in Moscow. Why should you go on sitting in that hole? Tomorrow I'll introduce you to Mezentsev—he'll do something for you."

Ivan Antonovich extended his visit to the conference a day or two so as to see Lev Arkadievich Mezentsev. Until then he had known him only by hearsay, for Lev Arkadievich had graduated from the Polytechnical Institute three years before him. The Design Institute where Lev Arkadievich headed a leading department was new and showed great promise. The track of the Great Ferghana Canal was being laid out. The Volga banks were being explored for suitable sites for future hydro-electric power plants. Mezentsev was in need of experienced engineers and readily took on Ivan Antonovich. The only difficulty that arose in their negotiations was the question of where Ivan Antonovich was to live, but since the Institute was building a block of flats for its workers, Mezentsev promised to find a room in it for Ivan Antonovich.

Thirty years had passed since then and despite the natural vicissitudes occurring in such a long stretch of time, Ivan Antonovich had always felt grateful to Lev Arkadievich and had always served him well and loyally.

Here in Moscow he had felt for the first time that he carried some weight. He had a room to himself—true, a smallish one with but a single window in it, but he could now collect a library and entertain his friends. Another reason why he felt he carried some weight was because he was entrusted with responsibility. He was sent to do important reconnoitre and survey work and to help in the choice of major construction sites.

Besides (and this he looked upon as his crowning good fortune)—it was here he met Lena.

He had first seen her at the time when their group was designing the Ferghana Canal. Suddenly they were asked urgently to submit blue-prints of the various versions proposed. Mezentsev's group and the topographers sat up all night getting them ready. At about four in the morning, when all of them were dead tired, Lena came in to take the latest drawings to be copied. Formerly the copying had been done by Kira Khudyakova, a frail-looking freckled-faced girl with a sharp nose, whom they nicknamed the Sparrow. She was indeed as grey and harmless as a sparrow.

Suddenly this new girl appeared. "Ready, Ivan Antonovich? " she said. He was not ready and in his haste to check on the draughtsman's measurements he did not even lift his head from the board. Unabashed, Lena sat down on a stool opposite his desk and watched him. When she became bored by sitting there in silence she began teasing him for his industry. "Careful, you'll bite your tongue off! " (this referred to his habit of thrusting the tip of his tongue between his teeth when he worked). He glanced over the edge of his slanting board and saw nothing but a pair of eyes—enormous grey eyes. He raised his head a little higher. Enormous eyes in a face drawn from lack of sleep. He studied the face for a moment before going back to work.

"He did bite it off once," volunteered Andrei Olkhovsky. "I glanced into the waste-paper basket and what do you think I saw? Half a tongue. 'What's this, Ivan Antonovich? ' I said, but he was too busy to bother about such a trifle."

In the same tone of levity Olkhovsky went on to sing Ivan Antonovich's praises: "He does the work of ten. And he doesn't smoke, drink, or run after women."

"Hasn't met the right woman," rejoined Lena, calmly and with a solemnity beyond her years.

Ivan Antonovich looked at her again and for a longer time. She suffered his gaze without wincing and he, aware that he was reddening, sought refuge behind his board. But he kept stealing glances at her and saying to himself: There's a girl for you!

From that time on she was distinguished in his eyes from all the other copyists, topographers, and young women engineers. The Institute had a large staff and he could easily have chosen a more striking girl from among some two hundred he came in contact with. His experience with Shura, however, had made him shrink from the bright skirts that flashed past like butterflies. Lena dressed quietly and a little seedily, she did not pencil her brows or rouge her lips and gave the impression of being a modest soul. A day or two after that night, he and she left the Institute together and Ivan Antonovich offered to see her home. The Moscow Metro was under construction, the new station Red Gate had just been opened and he proposed they go and see it. He found her good company, she was well-read and told him many interesting things about the theatre. Ivan Antonovich in his turn spoke enthusiastically about the building of dams. "The future lies with technology, with electricity," he said. "In our age it is not poets Russia needs but engineers and practical men." She listened to him attentively, without interrupting, and the evening was over before they knew it.

The next day he called her up in the copying room and asked her to meet him again.

From day to day they got to know each other better. She liked the enthusiasm he showed for his work, he liked her modesty and the knowledge she had of things he knew little about. The better they got to know each other, the greater grew their—no, it was not love or passion as it had been with Shura—their interest in each other. He knew she had finished the Stroganov Institute of Applied Arts and that on graduating she had been offered a job as consultant at a folk-art workshop situated in the little town of Krasnoye on the Volga. It was there she had done her practice work, and while she had no particular desire to leave Moscow, she agreed to

accept the position. Just before assignments were finally confirmed, however, she was called into the personnel office and offered work in Moscow. She was told it would be interesting and she accepted the assurance on faith, having but the vaguest idea of what she would be called upon to do. Apparently the personnel office had no more definite an idea. The request that artists be assigned to the Waterways Designing Institute was endorsed by the Deputy Minister. This followed on an unfortunate occurrence at a meeting of high officials, where the Institute under his supervision was given a formal reprimand for submitting plans of a new project in a form so sloppy and confusing that a request was made that in future such projects should be represented by pictures executed in exact perspective and in colour so that at a single glance it would be clear what was water and what concrete, on which side of the canal there was sand and on which woods. It was then decided to invite two or three artists for this work, but so much time passed before this decision went through all the stages required for its being approved and implemented that the reason for its adoption was forgotten, and when Lena and two other graduates of the Art Institute reported at the personnel office the chief, after one glance at their papers, wrote a note referring them to Mezentsev, and he, a busy and practical man, despatched them to the draughting room as copyists "to reinforce a weak link" without bothering to examine their credentials.

Lena reported this with a sense of humour, behind which Ivan Antonovich detected a note of dissatisfaction with her position as copyist. He tried to convince her she was wrong. According to him, the main thing in life was to serve that which was great, be it a great undertaking or a great man. The undertaking he and Lena were serving was so enormous that their mere association with it ought to bring them joy. The dams and canals they were building would stand through the ages. Future generations would not care who had tramped up and down the river banks with theodolites and who had found the best sites for their dams and who had made or copied the blue-prints. The only thing of consequence would be the dams themselves and the electricity they produced.

Ardently as he argued his point, Lena remained unconvinced. She said, on the contrary, that in little undertakings one might be great. One might, for instance, find happiness in designing a brooch to adorn a woman's frock. The secret of happiness lay in the search, in the creative effort. There was nothing interesting in simply multiplying somebody else's drawings or ideas.

Ivan Antonovich tried to prove her wrong, she replied by saying she herself had been of his opinion not so long before. "I too was willing to serve a great man—but I saw the light in time," she added softly.

Now as he read the diary entry recording her visit to the country he knew who that great man had been. At the time of the argument he had surmised nothing. This argument, however, had served to deepen their relationship. Ivan Antonovich enjoyed being in her company, he invited her to the theatre, then she invited him, then came his birthday and he had a little celebration in his room to which he invited Lena. In another month or two they could not let a day pass without seeing each other.

And then, early in the spring, they quarrelled about some trifle and kept apart for two days; they even sought a different hour to have lunch in the Institute dining-room. It was then he realised life was a bore without her.

Loath to go home after work, he wandered idly in Bauman Park an hour or two, then took the Metro to the street Lena lived in. Not knowing the number of her house, he wandered up and down until almost midnight in the hope of seeing her.

When he got home, weary and dejected, the neighbour who opened the door threw him a meaningful look and asked: "Where have you been all this time, young man? " "I was delayed at the office," he lied. "At the office? I see." She pushed the door of his room open and said insinuatingly, "Well, there's someone waiting for you."

He stood stock still in astonishment. Lena was sitting at the table.

12

"13 Dec. I had a dream. I dreamt I was sitting on the steps of a house and crying. Suddenly I saw him coming

down the street. He caught sight of me, came over, looked at me, turned without a word and went on his way. I cried all the harder. He stopped. This time he came up to me quickly and kissed me on the forehead like a kind father.

"17 Dec. V. V. dropped in. 'Hullo! ' he said, and went into N. K.'s room as if nothing had happened. Perhaps nothing had. Perhaps he did not fondle me and go through that 'psychological study' in the country. Perhaps I imagined it. Perhaps it was a dream or a hallucination. I begin to believe it must have been because everything remains the same between us. Everything should have been different after that, he should have been inwardly transformed, shaken up, should have become more expansive. But there is only a great calm and flatness.

"31 Dec. New Year's Eve. I fussed in the kitchen. I, whom N. K. calls 'the soul of all that is festive', had nobody with whom to share tonight's festivities. I kept consoling myself by saying holidays are a foolish invention. Why should this day be a holiday? Who appointed it? Why? I am not in a holiday mood; it is no different from any other day for me. I don't want any celebration! And suddenly the door opened and there stood V. V. 'Happy New Year! ' I gasped. He handed me a bunch of daffodils. My heart sang, 'I am not alone! I am not alone! He is with me! He is with me! This New Year's Eve and forever! ' I began rushing from dining-room to kitchen and back again. 'Lena, bring some more nuts! ' Here, more and more! Help yourselves! Lots of people, lots of toasts. 'Here's to all those I loved and love! ' A clinking of glasses. 'Happy New Year! May it bring you happiness! '

"I Jan. This year will bring me misery. I know it. I know it only too well.

"17 Jan. I was sick all week, got up today for the first time. Feel giddy. Thought of nothing but him all day. I have an extraordinary sense of his presence. 'Back, Rex! '

"28 Jan. An odd conversation took place at the supper-table tonight. N. K.: High time we introduced Lena to our circle of friends. I thought you would see to that, V. V., but apparently you are not to be counted on. I

shall take care of the matter myself. V. V. blushed, the poor darling, and I thought to myself: Introduce me to your 'circle' if you wish, but don't expect me to feel obliged or grateful for it. Too late for that, old dear. I have already made a little chink for myself in that stone wall.

"12 Feb. The first night of Hamlet. A smashing success! V. V. was incomparable! How I love him! I went behind stage between the acts. He was delighted to know I was there. Kissed my hand. But with all those people about he could not show me anything more than the conventional courtesy he offered all his acquaintances: 'Oh, yes; any day, at any performance. Just mention my name.' When a convenient moment presented itself he drew me into his dressing-room and said: 'Don't go home when it's over. It's such a day for me! Let's go to a restaurant, just the two of us.' 'Just the two of us! ' sang my heart. We went to a crowded restaurant filled with cigarette smoke. Hardly found a table. V. V. was inspired, he talked on and on about art. 'The art of the actor, like the art of the poet, is born of despondency. Art and bombast are incompatible. Meyerhold and his theatricalities are more realistic than GorkyHs Satin from *The Lower Depths*. And then he waxed lyrical, to put it mildly! 'The Impressionist painters realised that. They left their studios, they rejected narrative painting and began to paint naked bodies on green grass.'

"I was light-headed with wine and we wandered through the streets till three in the morning. Then we took a taxi, and again a 'psychological study'.

"18 Feb. On Friday I rushed home from the Institute only to be told, 'He just left.' I was so vexed I bit my lip till it bled. Had to wait until Sunday. Loves me, loves me not. See him, see him not. He didn't come today either. Rehearsing. I'm supposed to be studying for the state exams and all I can do is sit and day-dream. I have observed one thing: when he is among the actors who congregate at N. K.'s he is distant, alien and unapproachable for me, and the more friendly he is with them, the farther away he is from me. But when they are not around, when we are alone, our relations are clear and simple. Wonderfully simple.

"25 Feb. I love him. I can't live without him. I want to see his tired face after the play, I want to stroke all the lines out of it.

"3 March. N. K. and I have become bosom friends. At first she looked on me as a sort of lady's maid. 'Run to the shop and fetch such-and-such for me, Lena,' 'Make the coffee, Lena.' Her attitude changed completely as soon as she got wind of my affair with V. V. A great triumph, but ... what of it?

"30 March. March has been a month of great agitation and little reward. V. V. came on the 4th, 5th and 14th. Incredibly handsome and gentle, and melancholy. He said to me patronisingly, 'Beware of gallant gentlemen, Lena; but beware even more of the flunkeys who worm themselves into your affections.' He told me about L., their theatre manager. On the jubilee of some great functionary (who had a box reserved in the theatre) L., in his eagerness to attract the attention of this minor deity (who could make or break him), rushed to the telegraph office and poured out his adulation on a flower-bedecked birthday blank. On coming back he found one of the actors looking worried. 'What's the matter?' asked L. The actors told him the functionary in question had been removed from office. L.'s hair stood on end. Back he ran to the telegraph office to cancel his wire, but the woman at the window only laughed and said, 'That's what telegrams are for—to get there quickly. The addressee has already received yours.'

"7 April. Bed unmade. Beautiful new shoes lolling on the floor. Noon. The owner of the shoes has just come out of a deep sleep. She went to bed late last night. When? At 2? 3? 4? Don't know. After the play V. V. saw me home. Along the Tverskoy Boulevard. Past Pushkin with bowed head. 'Where is the Institute sending you for practice work, Lena?' 'To Krasnoye, on the Volga. There's a folk art workshop there.' 'The Actor's Union has a rest-home at Plyoss, not far from Krasnoye. May I come and be near you?' Oh, la-la-la! Away, away, to the land of heart's desire! When we reached Gogol Boulevard we turned back. Again Pushkin bowed his head as if reproving us, but a lot we cared! We walked until dawn. It was getting light when we sat down on a bench near Sivtsev Vrazhek Street. Not a soul

in sight. Another 'study', not psychological this time. 'I love you, Lena,' he said in a whisper. 'Say it again, I didn't hear.' He said it again. And again. Again and again. His hand slid over me (crossed out) like a knife, I pushed it away. 'What about your wife? And son?'

"My heels went tapping along the quiet by-street and I sobbed fit to break my heart. Little fool!

"8 April. I've thought of nothing but V. V. all morning. He is extraordinary on the stage—a poet, a god, all that is superb! I worship him on the stage, but in ordinary life I have good reason to know he is just like everybody else, even less interesting than many another. Evidently the actor burns bright on the stage, giving his whole self to his part, with nothing left over for real life. Certainly V. V.'s resources are not sufficient for two lives. Only a genius' are.

"20 April. Ah, the torture! Will he come or not? Suddenly I thought I heard his voice. I glance into N. K.'s room. There he was. Again, as in the country, I was overwhelmed. Wanted to throw up everything and leap over a cliff. Mephistopheles for sure.

"25 April. Valya has come back. Very much changed. Only natural after all she's been through. That encounter with his first wife and the deciding of who the children are to live with. They've moved to Kursk where he has a new job. Valya is the only friend I've ever confided in. Valya and this diary. I long to tell her about V. V. but I'm afraid. She's had such a miserable experience herself, she'll begin talking me out of it.

"28 April. 1:0 in my favour. I've passed my first exam: history of art.

"2 May. I am a fool, I know it and can't do anything about it. Today I up and went out to the country where he has his *dacha*. Wandered through the woods all by myself until dark. I was hoping to meet him. I breathed in the smell of young grass, delighted in the silence, and oh, the sky! —what a sky there was! All my doubts and fears for the future vanished. Nothing mattered but seeing him. I found myself in the very heart of the woods and hardly made my way back. It seemed only yesterday that I had been in that same woods. Then I had been filled with a great emptiness, I saw nothing but the packed snow under my feet, not a drop of hope was

left, I had come to a dead end. Nothing but those bare birches. Then came the thaw, the reawakening, spring, and the birches put out their sticky green leaves.

"10 May. A glorious morning. Yesterday N. K. and her maid went out to her *dacha*. I am living here alone. Tomorrow I have my next exam. I was sitting on the couch with a book in my hand and only one thought in my head: will he come or won't he? Does he love me or doesn't he?

"It was a hot day—summer has come. I went out on the balcony. There he was, coming down the street, I instantly recognised him by his walk. He had on a light suit and was carrying some flowers. I felt panicky—should I open the door to him or not? He knew N. K. had gone to the *dacha,* he himself arranged for the car that took her. The bell rang. I couldn't find my shoes. Found them. Tap-tap to the door. Calm yourself, fool! For a moment I stood wavering—me on this side, he on the other. I could hear him breathing heavily from climbing the stairs. I opened the door. He looked as embarrassed as a child. 'Allow me to congratulate you, Lena,' he said, holding out the flowers. 'What for? ' 'Your exam.' 'My exam's tomorrow.' 'Oh, well, something else then—the fine weather, perhaps.' He doesn't remember things about me, which means he doesn't love me. He took a little parcel out of his pocket and unwrapped it. It was a lovely mauve veil trimmed with dark lace. 'A little present. Here, let me tie it round your hair.' He did. 'How becoming it is! You are like Katerina from Ostrovsky's *Storm.* Not Strepetova's Katerina—more lyrical, like Pashennaya in her youth.' I looked at him gratefully and he understood everything, everything. He couldn't help understanding. 'Dear Lena, dear, dear Lena! '

Come and sit beside me, darling;
Come and sit and let me gaze....

"I sat beside him on the couch and felt calm and elated. We sat there for two hours talking, the theme being: 'Tell me how you have been loved; tell me how you have loved.' I told him about my various infatuations, about L. and V. In a word, I behaved like a silly little schoolgirl—and with so great a man, so great an actor! ".

13

"I told him about my various infatuations." Ivan Antonovich was beside himself. He threw the notebook on the table with such violence that it fell on the floor. He turned over on his side, mentally consigning the notebook to the devil. He resolved to read no more, even think no more about the ravings of that foolish girl. For fifteen minutes he lay quietly but he could not go to sleep. Could not even go on lying there. He got up and began pacing the floor. His heart was thumping. The room was stuffy. He pulled back the curtains, opened the door to the balcony and sat down in the armchair. Then he got up and closed the curtains. The street was narrow, neighbours across the street might see him and think he was crazy, sitting there in his pajamas.

Once more he sat in the armchair, settling himself more comfortably this time, and fell to thinking. First he considered how he might find out more about Lena's love for Mtsensky. Nina Konstantinovna was dead; so was that cad V. V., thank God. Should he ask Katya about him? That was it. Surely Lena must have told her elder sister about her affair. But Ivan Antonovich must be subtle, not make any direct inquiries. Katya, it seemed, had been a member of the same troupe Nina Konstantinovna and Mtsensky had belonged to. He would invite her and her husband to the play and they would meet acquaintances and he would find an opportunity to turn the conversation to the great actors who had appeared on that stage, and this would allow him to introduce Mtsensky's name: "Vladislav Vladimirovich was one of them, of course...." "Oh, yes," Katya would say. "Those were the days! " and she would launch upon reminiscences. "There was a time when Lena never missed a performance." "Because she was mad on Mtsensky? " he would put in casually, as if he knew everything. The rest depended on Katya. She might say, "Oh, yes, had a crush on him as young girls have crushes on tenors from the Opera." Or perhaps she might say ... oh, let her say anything, so long as it referred to Lena and V. V. The worst thing would be if she simply turned away and was silent.

The next moment a vision of Katya's dull sleepy eyes rose in his mind and he scolded himself for thinking she could tell him anything. She no doubt had forgotten even her own love affairs, to say nothing of those of her deceased sister. And indeed was it not ignoble of him to be feeling such jealousy and thinking such thoughts about a woman with whom he had spent all his life? Why should he pry into the past and resurrect the dead? This thought quieted him for a while. He ought to have talked to Lena herself about such things, and not in the last moments of her life but when they had just met.

Again he remembered the evening when Lena had first come to his room. There she was sitting at his table in a white blouse. She looked so fresh, so expectant! His immediate response was amazement verging on rapture. He shut the door against the neighbour's curiosity and went happily to meet her. She got up. She, too, must have suffered because of their estrangement, judging by the impulsive movement she made towards him. They embraced but did not kiss, greeting each other like long lost friends. They embraced and patted each other's shoulders and looked smiling into each other's eyes. The smile told them everything. Unable to control his emotions, Ivan Antonovich plunged into preparations for tea. He ran to the kitchen, lighted the primus stove, brought in some stale biscuits and the sugar-bowl. While he turned his writing-table into a tea-table the kettle boiled and they sat down opposite each other and began their little feast. They drank and stole glances at each other and smiled. Smiled without speaking, smiled only with their eyes.

It was very late by the time they finished and Lena got up to go home, but Ivan Antonovich said he couldn't let her go yet, he would see her home. He sat her down on the couch and fondled her as clumsily as an inexperienced boy, trying to steal a kiss. She drew away and covered her face with her hands and said, "Don't, please don't. Stop it," but he could not stop and she must have found his ardour distasteful for at the very moment when he caught her in his embrace and thought his efforts were to be rewarded, she removed his arms and held his hands with a strength extraordinary and said with vehemence, "Dear Ivan Antonovich, how can such a

respectable man behave so foolishly?" "Foolishly?" he repeated in a piqued voice. "Why?" "Because you are trying to kiss a woman you don't really know."

He was discomfitted by her rationality but turned it off with a joke:

"I trust our personnel department. If there were the slightest blot on your record you would never have been allowed to work at our Institute."

She paid in kind. "In this case the personnel department has let you down."

"How?"

"I am not what I seem."

"There is a blot on your record? What does it refer to?"

"My personal life."

"For instance?"

"For instance, I smoke."

"So do I."

"Men allow themselves many indulgences they cannot stomach in women."

"You and I can always come to terms. If I object to your smoking you'll drop it, won't you?"

The self-assurance with which he said this made her lift an eyebrow. She did not, however, take it up, and the next moment murmured with a winning smile, "And then I once loved somebody else."

14

She had, in fact, told him everything. If he had been slightly more out-going, slightly more attentive to her and more in love with her, he would have asked "Who? When? Tell me all about it!" and she would have told him. He did not ask. He simply said to himself: That's only natural, she's out of her teens. Indeed he did not want to ask, for confidences on her part would have called forth confidences on his. He would have had to tell her about his love affairs, including the one with Shura Cherepnina and this was still an open wound he shrank from probing. And so, as if loftily indifferent to such matters, he returned to his foolish love-making with increased ardour. She laughed and twisted out of his

grasp, amused by his ineptness, and when she could stand it no longer got up, freed herself from his embrace and said with a sigh, "Enough's enough. Time for me to be going."

Ivan Antonovich saw her home as he had promised. And not to the gate, he said to himself now, thinking of V. V., but to her very house. They crossed the whole of Moscow, walking along the Sadovoye Ring from Zemlyanoi Bank to Krymskaya Square, or rather to Neopalimovsky Lane (by that time he knew where the Blagovidov family lived). What did they not talk about on that memorable night! What did they not ask each other! The one thing he did not ask her was who she had loved, and when. He did not ask her throughout the whole of that long hot summer, although they met every day and walked along the dusty Sadovoye Ring every night almost until dawn. "I did not ask her throughout the whole of our long life together, let alone that summer!" he thought bitterly. He never found time to have it out. He tried to piece together reminiscences of their life, which, it turned out, had not been so very long after all, and certainly not very eventful.

That summer had been the happiest in their life. Though Lena had not been his first woman, his love for her had been different from that for others, even for Shura Cherepnina. With Lena he experienced a certain tranquility, whereas with others he had been like a calf on a rope, balking and tossing his head in protestation. The others had captivated him by their beauty or their bright clothes or their coyness and accessibility. He did not even stop to think what it was that drew him to Lena. Formerly it had been torture to find himself alone in a woman's company. He could think of nothing to say, sweat stood out on his forehead and his mouth went dry. With Lena, on the contrary, he longed to be alone. He longed to take her by the hand and walk from one end of Moscow to the other, talking, talking, talking. The day he failed to see her stretched out into an eternity, so much did he miss her, so badly did he need her.

At the very height of their love he was sent away on business, and not for a day or week but for an entire month. Efforts were being made to regulate the current of the Manych River and the builders needed more infor-

mation about the terrain. Ivan Antonovich was put in charge of a team of explorers and they set out for Salsk, where the Institute had temporary headquarters. He spent all of August there. Lena wrote to him almost every day. Her letters (lost, unfortunately, during the war) were so sincere and expressed such solicitude for him that he felt she must love him.

When work was finished at the end of August, Ivan Antonovich telephoned to Mezentsev and asked for a two weeks' holiday. Lev Arkadievich readily granted it, pleased as he was with the work of the team and its leader. The topographers and geologists returned to Moscow, Ivan Antonovich went to Gelenjik, then a quiet little town on the Black Sea with a fine beach and a noisy market-place.

He found a house near the sea where he hired two tiny rooms and wired Lena to ask for a leave and join him. Everybody, including Lev Arkadievich, knew of their friendship, and the leave was given. That same week Lena arrived in Gelenjik. They spent only ten days together, but they were the happiest ten days of their lives.

By the end of August all summer vacationists with children had gone home to prepare for the new school year. There were no longer crowds on the beach and in the market-place, and housewives were willing to offer board along with rooms. Their landlady, a dark-haired woman with an aquiline nose like a Greek, but with a Ukrainian accent, got up early while they were still enjoying the last delicious hours of sleep and set the table out in a summer-house. At eight o'clock they got up, had a breakfast of cold curds in clay pots, fried fish and stuffed marrows, and set out for the beach. On the way they stopped at the market to buy grapes, melons and sometimes a bottle of young Kaberne, and with their burden distributed evenly between them they made their way to a spot far outside of town. When they had found a cozy corner between rocks at the edge of the sea, they arranged their things and spent the whole day together, just the two of them. They swam and romped like children, running races and hiding from each other, and when they were tired, sitting and lying on the beach, drinking wine and eating grapes salty from being washed in the

sea. When evening came and the sun sank below the violet waves they went home tired and happy.

"Had your fill of swimming? Good for you. All day in the water," would be their landlady's greeting as she busied herself with the dinner. She accepted them as newlyweds spending their honeymoon at the seashore. They gave her good reason to draw this conclusion. On their first day Lena thoughtlessly exposed herself too long to the sun; by evening she had a chill and headache and big blisters on her back. In alarm Ivan Antonovich ran to the chemist's but the shop was closed. None of the passers-by could tell him where the chemist lived until he happened to ask a local fisherman, who took him to the house and helped him talk the grumbling old man into serving him after the closing hour. The chemist gave Ivan Antonovich some vile-smelling black salve and when, on reaching home, he burst into Lena's room without knocking, he found the landlady rubbing her back with eau-de-Cologne.

He was embarrassed and the landlady got up and went out, leaving them alone. "Thank you, Vanya; it was sweet of you to go to all that trouble," and rewarded him with a kiss. Then she threw back the sheet and said, "Rub it on. My back and legs are burning as if on fire." He opened the tin, spread the salve on his palms and began to rub. Never before had he really seen her body. She was wearing the bathing-suit in which she had been at the beach. But then he was too modest to study her; now he could not help it. He saw her shoulders with two attractive little moles, one near the neck, the other near a shoulder-blade. He felt the firmness of her arms and hips and saw that she was beautifully shaped, quite as beautifully as Shura Cherepnina. And as he admired her he realised she was the only woman he wanted, that this body blistered by the sun was part of himself, that there was nobody dearer to him than Lena and never would be. He began kissing her without restraint, and this time Lena did not resist as she had heretofore; instead, raising her head from the pillow, she smiled shyly and gratefully at him. So absorbed were they in each other that they did not hear the landlady come in. "Oh, think of me bursting in like that! I brought you a different cover so that horrid salve doesn't spoil the sheets." She put down

the cover and hurried out. What she saw made her conclude her boarders were newlyweds. "Wife! Husband! " she would call, "Dinner's ready! " They would laugh in reply, for as yet they were not husband and wife. Many years later when, during the war, the Committee of Defence summoned Ivan Antonovich to Moscow from far-away Salekhard for one single day and Lena, who had not expected him, met him with tears of love and joy, she told him she was sorry they had known no intimacy in Gelenjik. "To think we only had one night together! " she cried in a burst of candour. "And in Gelenjik we could have spent ten nights together! I longed to at the time. I used to wake up in the middle of the night and wonder if you would come to me. Women are allotted such a small portion of happiness in this world that one can't help regretting any that is allowed to slip by unclaimed."

In saying this she was reproving him gently for his procrastination. He, however, felt no guilt. On the contrary, even now as he looked back over that holiday by the sea he was proud and pleased he had been able to restrain himself instead of being importunate, as that night in his room on Zemlyanoi Bank. His respect and restraint had declared the seriousness of his intentions, and Ivan Antonovich was nothing if not serious in all things.

When his holiday was over Lena still had a few more days at her disposal. He tried to talk her into remaining in Gelenjik, but she said she would die of boredom without him. "How could I go back alone to that spot among the rocks where we were so happy together? " she said. "No, we'll both go to Moscow. I'll spend the rest of my holiday at Nina Konstantinovna's *dacha.* At least we'll be near each other, we can phone and see each other."

And so they both came back.

15

It was September in Moscow. There was a drizzle of rain and scowling people in mackintoshes stared in wonderment at the couple who, sunburnt and with uncovered heads, stood in the square in front of the Kursky

Railway Station unable to tear themselves apart and go their separate ways. It was then Ivan Antonovich made a great mistake; it was then he behaved as no true man ought to behave. As soon as they came out on the square he ought to have taken her by the arm, looked into her eyes and said, "Now, darling, you're going home with me—to your home, where you're to be mistress. Why drag things out? This evening we'll go and see your parents and ask their blessing." But he faltered, he lost heart. And so there they stood at the tram station for upward of an hour, unable to part. In the end he noticed she was shivering and wilting with weariness and so he took her bag and her crate of fruit, tossed them into the next tram, boosted her up the steps and with feigned buoyancy called out, "So long! Give me a ring! " The tram set off, Lena wiped a peep-hole in the steamy window of the back platform, in which he caught a glimpse of her disconsolate face. He too felt disconsolate. He waved, picked up his luggage and walked off. His mood did not last long, however. As soon as he got home to his "digs" (as he jokingly referred to his little room in the communal flat) his dejection was supplanted by concern for his job. What was happening on the Manych? Was the information his team had gathered being properly sorted and tabulated? Next morning he went to the Institute and got his team together to find out how the work was progressing.

It was progressing very well. Ivan Antonovich was pleased. He had always held that the main thing in life was one's work and he was proud of being an engineer. In his student days his comrades had called him lazy for not participating in any of their social activities. Was it laziness that made him throw himself so whole-heartedly into his studies that he had no time for other concerns? Learning did not come easily to him and he spent all his free time in the library. His diligence was rewarded; he mastered his profession. It was for this Mezentsev valued him so highly. He wasted no time on recreations like card-playing. Or love-making. Or there had been that affair with Shura, but that was a thing of the past. These were approximately the thoughts occupying Ivan Antonovich's mind that morning when they brought him the soil analyses. Sand. Oddly enough the word did not

evoke a vision of the Manych's banks overgrown with reeds and grasses, but of the Gelenjik beach. One morning they had found a spot far beyond the town where the beach was covered with fine clean sand instead of the usual sea-polished pebbles. There they had lain eating grapes, their backs exposed to the sun. Ivan Antonovich had picked up handfuls of the sand and sprinkled it on Lena's back and she had laughed and squirmed when she found it too hot.

"Sand ... sand.... What the devil!" He was displeased with himself, he even tapped with his pencil irritably. Never before had he allowed his mind to be distracted during working hours. Even when Shura had made things uncomfortable for him in the Leningrad office, he had kept himself in hand. And now, no matter what business came up, all his thoughts were of Lena.

The telephone rang. "It's for you, Ivan Antonovich."

They had only one telephone for the entire department. It stood on a desk in the middle of the big room beside the tea-kettle filled with drinking-water. Taking a call as well as taking a drink meant being in the public eye. As he walked to the phone the young girls in the office whispered to one another as they watched him, "Look, our Lena doesn't seem to have got fed up with him on their holiday."

They were right, it was Lena on the phone.

"Hullo, Vanya," he heard her say in a melancholy voice. "How are you?"

"Okay. And you?"

"More or less. There's trouble at home."

"What?"

"Mother's in the hospital."

"Anything serious?"

"I'll tell you when I see you." There was a little pause before she added, "I miss you. May I come tonight?"

He was delighted by the prospect of seeing her so soon and worked with added zeal the rest of the day. She came in the evening, looking more charming than ever but also more pensive. She told him about her family. Her mother and both her elder sisters were on the stage. Her father was a settings artist who considered himself a failure and drank more than was good for him.

Everybody at the theatre loved him despite his weakness. Both of her sisters were married and engrossed in their own cares so that when her father was drunk or her mother ill there was nothing that drew her home. He understood her better after this and she became even dearer to him.

In a week's time Lena came back to work.

It was the end of September, the weather was too cold and raw for walking along the Sadovoye Ring in the evenings, so they went to his room, had tea and read. When it got late he saw her home.

She stayed later and later as time went on, and one night in the middle of October they left his house so late that not a single tram cast its beams into the night and no taxi came cruising. They stood on the corner for a quarter of an hour or so in the vain hope of finding some sort of transportation. The night was cold and rainy. Could they cross the whole of Moscow on foot? Ivan Antonovich glanced at Lena. She was standing beside him, leaning on his shoulder. The kerchief on her head was soaking wet and rain was streaming down her tired face. Suddenly something snapped inside him. A man wouldn't put his dog out in such weather and here am I putting out my beloved, he said to himself. Without a word he took her arm and led her back to the house. She did not object, she did not pull her arm away or ask any questions; she simply went along with quiet composure as if the problem had been discussed and the decision made long before.

Nothing was consummated that first night: there was no wild passion and unforgettable love-making. As he looked back on it, he remembered that she looked perplexed and embarrassed, and he must have too. But soon thereafter Lena came to live with him for good. Came as she was, bringing nothing with her, neither clothes nor books nor even a pillow. That first month they both slept on one pillow. During the November holidays they had a sort of wedding; his parents and brothers came from Leningrad, and, together with Lena's parents and sisters with their husbands and a few friends from the Institute they held a party inaugurating a shared life that was to be neither very exciting nor very happy.

A life which, however you looked at it, was now over.

Over. Done with. When, why, how had it passed so quickly? Try as he might, Ivan Antonovich could not comprehend it. He sat on in the armchair reviewing the past and striving to find meaning in it. Why had life been given to him and to her? Had they spent it worthily? Life is like water, he thought; it slips like water through your fingers. What remained of her—of Lena? Surely there must have been some reason behind her coming into this world. She was born, she suffered, she rejoiced. What was left of her sufferings and rejoicings? Their son Misha was left. Nothing else. If she had pursued the profession she loved, if she had designed jewelry or china, these things would have remained when she was gone. Her character, her view of the world, her joys and sorrows, would have been expressed in the forms and colours of tea- and dinner-sets; long after she was gone people would have found use for the things born of her joys and sorrows. They would have picked up a cup of her designing and turned it in their fingers, enjoying the drawing on it or the combination of colours; and perhaps one day an old greybeard would have said to his grandchild, pointing to the cup, "They knew how to make china in those days! For fifty years I've been drinking from this cup and the gold hasn't worn off yet! " Or perhaps a lovely young woman would have said to her husband as she fastened a brooch to the frock she was wearing to the theatre, "Grandmother left me this brooch, it's over a hundred years old. It was made by a group of folk-artists with a workshop in the little town of Krasnoye on the Volga long ago, even before World War II. Hand engraved. They don't do such things nowadays."

She would have been remembered by the things she left behind her. But it was not given to Lena to design china and jewelry. Instead she swept floors, washed clothes, got dinner, raised her son, and in every way preserved her husband's peace and well-being. From the very first day of their life together Ivan Antonovich made it clear that he, engineer Teplov, was engaged in important work, as compared to which tea-cups and earrings were mere folderol. How could such trinkets stand up against the mighty engineering feats he was achieving? She accepted his judgement. But as no woman can

live without her dreams, she developed an interest in his work. When Ivan Antonovich's hour came he would die knowing he had not lived in vain. He certainly was leaving something behind him! He had dug canals in Central Asia and in the Salsk Steppe. His labour had gone into the building of dozens of power plants bringing light into people's homes. He it was who had chosen the sites for many of the dams on great Siberian rivers that were now in construction. Oh, yes; people had something to remember him by! He had improved the world. Then the thought occurred to him that hundreds, even thousands of other people had taken part in the designing of these dams and canals. It was doubtful, then, that anybody would remember him, engineer Teplov, fifty years hence. But human psychology was such that people have to find something with which to console themselves for life's difficulties. Some find consolation in their children, others in the theatre or music, and he, Ivan Antonovich, found consolation in his work. Work had always taken first place in his life. Family, theatre, books—they were all secondary.

Work, work, work. That had been his life. He had loved Lena mostly because she shared his absorption in his work and helped him advance in it.

He had worked selflessly. How many trips to Siberia, the Volga, Central Asia had he been sent on! Most of their life had been spent in the bustle of packing, parting, meeting again. What had occupied Lena while he was away? Alas, he did not know. Life? A merry-go-round! he thought bitterly. He'd had no time to stop and think, to gaze into the well from which he had drunk until he had drunk it dry.

Only now, on this night, did he stop and look back.

16

The past lived so vividly in his mind that Ivan Antonovich did not hear the clock strike twelve, then one. It was only the sound of a key turning in the lock that made him start and hurriedly get out of the chair. His son had come home and the room in such disorder! He went over to his couch and hid the "prayer-book" under

the pillow. He turned to the wardrobe to pick up Lena's underwear but Misha came in before he had time.

"Seen her home?" asked Ivan Antonovich to cover his embarrassment.

"Yes."

"It was a long minute you were gone. You said, 'I'll be back in a minute' and stayed most of the night."

"You know how it is, dad. One thing leads to another. I saw her home, then she decided to walk back to the Metro with me. That's how...." He broke off, catching sight of the veil. "So you found it?"

"Yes, while I was looking for a clean shirt." Ivan Antonovich stooped down and scooped up the underwear. "Did mother ever mention that veil to you?"

"No. Have you forgotten?—we searched for it together." Misha helped his father put the drawer back. There they stood side by side, two big awkward angular men, both of them keenly aware of their loss and for that reason drawn to each other. "Perhaps I'd better sleep in here tonight, dad," said Misha at last, indicating the couch on which his mother had slept. "You won't feel so lonely."

Ivan Antonovich did not answer at once. The presence of his son would certainly keep him from feeling so lonely, and loneliness was dangerous in such circumstances. But what about the diary? He had promised himself he would not look into it again but in his heart of hearts he knew he would; he knew the moment the door closed behind his son he would take the "prayer-book" out from under the pillow and plunge into it. Indeed he was impatient to be at it, and so he said, with all the composure he could muster:

"No, Misha, go into your own room. I'll be all right."

His son said goodnight and went out. Ivan Antonovich lighted a sigarette and paced the floor until he heard his son switch off the light, then he climbed into bed too and reached for the little green book. He leafed through it for the entry of 10 May, where he had left off. He found it and reread it, weighing every word and coming to the conclusion there had not been anything serious between Lena and V. V. Just a youthful flirtation. And the fancies of a highly emotional and suggest-

ible young girl. The one thing that troubled him was her trustfulness. "I told him about my various infatuations, about L. and V." And who did she make her confidant? A chance acquaintance, here today and gone tomorrow. Why did she never tell me such things? he thought with chagrin.

Again he tried to remember what he and she had talked about, and again he realised she had never confided in him because he had not asked for her confidences. Had not asked, had not asked! He, her husband, who had shared her life for thirty long years, had never asked her about anything—not about whom she had been in love with nor about her innermost thoughts and aspirations. This was the bitterest drop of all.

How is that? he asked himself in despair. How could he have lived so long with a woman he loved without exchanging confidences, without even having heart-to-heart talks with her? Oh, but that was impossible! They talked every day, sometimes at length. Yes indeed; why, to put it roughly (and here Ivan Antonovich did the quick mental arithmetic he resorted to when estimating the number of acres to be inundated)—to put it roughly, if he spent eight hours at the office, that left ... why, that left about fifteen at home! They had dinner together, went for walks or to the pictures, visited their friends; what did they talk about at the table, or with friends, or on their walks?

What did they talk about? Ivan Antonovich was happy to discover he knew what they talked about. First of all they talked about his work. His work of course, because he was the one engaged in really important activities and Lena took the liveliest interest in them. For that reason their conversation was mostly about what Mezentsev or the General himself had said about his, Ivan Antonovich's latest project; or about who was expected to be made Department Head, Ivan Antonovich or Vekshin, if the present head was promoted. They also talked about domestic affairs: Misha needed a winter coat and Ivan Antonovich must have a new pair of shoes: it was indecent to appear at the office in mended ones. Sometimes they talked about more elevated things like, say, politics, but this was rare and only when they were alone, just the two of them, and heaven forbid that

Misha or the neighbours should hear! Even between themselves their comments on politics were brief and non-committal.

Sometimes they discussed books. In such cases Lena did most of the talking. Of an impressionable nature, she would urge Ivan Antonovich to read the books she particularly enjoyed. He rarely had time to, but when he did his comments afterwards were usually restricted to a succinct judgement: either he liked it or he did not.

So what did we talk about? went on Ivan Antonovich. Everything, it appeared, that a husband and wife are expected to talk about.

But suddenly it occurred to him with an awful pang that they had never talked about the most important thing of all: their .feelings. Neither at the table, nor on their walks, nor on their way to the pictures. Never. Not even in bed. Even when in the darkness of night they were left alone with each other and with their feelings, they spoke only about business—his business, of course—and domestic needs. Never had he asked her if she loved him and how much she loved him. Never had he asked her if she was happy with him. Never. Not once. And the remembrance chilled him. He had never offered, never sought, intimacies.

In all the years they had lived together he had never told her what he thought of her, what he found her to be—pretty? kind? helpful? True, there had been that time, he did not now remember just when—ten, or perhaps twenty years after they were married—he had waked up earlier than she in the morning and had gone over to her (they slept on separate couches) and sat gazing at her face. There were traces of sadness, even tenseness, in it, but on the whole it was calm and lighted with the quiet wisdom of a mother's face. And he was touched to discover a resemblance between Lena and his mother and wondered why he had never noticed it before. He did not wish to wake her but before he had a chance to withdraw his eyes she opened hers. Seeing him studying her so, she asked, "Why are you looking at me like that, Vanya? Am I so hideous in sleep?" "Not at all, Lena," he had answered. "I was just thinking what a beautiful face you have and how dearly I love it. You remind me of my mother."

She rose on an elbow, overwhelmed by so unwonted a confession, and tears filled her eyes. Impulsively (he could not possibly have anticipated such a response on her part) she drew him to her and kissed him hurriedly, bathing his face in her tears and murmuring brokenly that he was so good and kind that no praise could have pleased her so much as what he had said. He was frightened by her impetuosity. Meagerly he returned her caresses, drew away, rose and went into the bathroom to shave. Never did Ivan Antonovich allow himself a show of affection to either his wife or his son. In his opinion a man should not give way to his feelings. Not to his joy or his sorrow or his anger. He never raised his voice at home. He did not raise his voice, but neither did he give way to unrestrained laughter; he did not even laugh out loud. He was always reserved and even-tempered, especially with Lena. He never showed any jealousy or made scenes as some husbands do, his brother-in-law Grigori Maximovich, for instance. He had seen Grigori and Katya in such a towering passion that he expected them to throw things at each other, and fifteen minutes later he found them sitting locked in each other's embrace. And he had seen Grigori pick Katya up in his arms and carry her to a taxi after she had had a drink too many at a party.

They fought and they made it up, and so they had something to remember. And their life seemed to last longer.

Ivan Antonovich had never raised his voice to Lena. And he had never carried her in his arms. There you were; that was that.

Sometimes, waking in a joyful mood, Lena had jumped up, run over to him and tried to pull him out of bed and make him dance with her. He remained as immovable as a hitchingpost. She would try to call forth some response by reciting poetry to him or making jokes, but he repelled all her advances with his implacable reserve. A reserve accompanied by silence. The same message was always written on his face: "I am a busy man; my mind is always occupied with serious matters." He shrank behind this defence like a snail in its shell. Within this shell he sought refuge from gossip, vulgarity, and—an exchange of confidences with his wife.

On the way home after the May Day celebration at which she had introduced him to V. V., she had tried again and again to make him ask about her relations with Mtsensky. Why had he not said, "How is it you know Vladislav Vladimirovich, Lena?" She would have told him everything. In return he would have told her all about Shura Cherepnina and other women he had known before Lena. Perhaps she would have been hurt to learn he had loved others, but he would have taken her in his arms and assured her she was the only one he truly loved and the one and only woman for him; and if he were offered his choice of forty times forty of the youngest, prettiest, cleverest women in the world, Lena would be the one he would choose.

How happy she would have been to hear such words! How generously she would have rewarded him!

17

It was the vagueness of his information that troubled Ivan Antonovich most of all. He had never asked, never found out anything—and now he never would, he thought with a sigh. But after lying alone and going over and over the matter in his mind, he saw things in a different light. Why would he never find out? What about the diary? She had written everything down, hiding nothing. He had only to read it attentively, analyse every word, every intonation, and the picture would come clear. He had got to the root of more complicated problems. He could chart the curve of a hydraulic jump, the slightest error which would lead to the collapse of a dam. Here he had only to read what was actually there before him. Ivan Antonovich considered his powers as a psychologist equal to those as an engineer. Having imbibed new strength from these reflections, he once more took up the diary.

"13 May. N. K. came back from the *dacha* today. She is going to the theatre to see *Vassa Zheleznova* tonight. Suddenly the doorbell rang. I didn't answer it. Again. Still I didn't go. I am not a maid to go running at every ring of the bell. After the third ring I heard his voice. He spoke to her and kissed her hand. My heart

was fluttering: loves me, loves me not. He paced the floor of the drawing room. 'Where is the charming Lena?' I caught the feigned indifference of his tone. A real actor. He came into my room without shutting the door behind him. 'I miss you, Lena. Let's go for a walk.' I tossed my books away and followed him. N. K. watched us suspiciously. Let her! I'm sick of her patronage. At home mother's eye is always on me, here it is hers. We set off at random. I adore walking with him, I feel light as a feather, as if walking on air.

"15 May. Stifling heat. Suffocating in the room where we took our exam. When it was over Volodya K. came up to me. He's a good chap, been courting me since our second year in the institute, but without any finesse. Today I didn't want to see him or be with him (for the first time!). I don't need him.

"21 May. One must always be firm. Chernyshevsky was right when he said, 'Never give a kiss without love.' Then one will never be tortured by that 'Oh, why did I ever do it?' Although of course, all is for the best in this best of all possible worlds. Let's see how matters stand: from I Jan. to 7 Apr. it looked as if we were to become good friends and nothing more. From 7 April to 10 May our relations entered a new phase and I felt I could fearlessly place all my trust in him. After 10 May—doubts. 'I don't really know you, Lena, or at least I hardly know you, but one thing is certain: only a richly endowed person can think and feel as you do.' Ah, friend Arkadi, must you make pretty speeches?

"25 May. He complained of life and told me about his quarrels with his wife. Looks as if things are coming to a head with them. Nothing else could be expected. Money, country houses, restaurants—such things lead to a vulgar middle-class view of life that crowds out love. N. K. told me long ago about their relations. His wife is a pretty but incapable actress. She would like to make him her lackey, make him wangle parts for her from the theatre management, make him bring food from town to their *dacha*. She doesn't realise at what price the privileges she enjoys as his wife were bought. He will soon be fifty and he acts on the stage every day as well as appearing in films and writing articles. She has surrounded herself with admirers who flatter her into thinking she is

a great actress. There's only one thing I long to know: does he love his son or not? If he does, then I understand why he puts up with his wife and all that stuffy life.

"28 May. He's as clumsy as a bear! We went to Gorky Park and took a ride on the Ferris wheel. As we were leaving at 11 o'clock I saw that the dance pavilion was crowded, 'Let's go and dance,' said I. 'Isn't it too late?' said he. I took his arm and dragged him after me. We began dancing and he did nothing but step on my toes. Oh, but he is a bear! I taught him a step or two and he said I danced beautifully."

"Does he love his son?" "He said I danced beautifully." What a maze! Ivan Antonovich's head went round. He could define and chart a hydraulic jump but he found it impossible to understand the psychology of a woman he had lived with for thirty years. Where was the dividing line between the serious and the infantile? Ivan Antonovich enjoyed reading the serious entries, but when he came to the frivolous ones he was so upset he had to put down the diary.

A disgrace, a disgrace! his lips quivered. A disgrace to have to admit to myself—to myself, mind, not to anybody else!—that I never knew she danced beautifully. Was she light on her feet? Did she follow her partner easily? Or was she as clumsy as that V. V.? He did not know. And he did not know because he had never danced with her.

"And now I never will." With a self-condemnation that was new to him, he pursued his train of thought: Dance! There were more serious deficiencies in their life together than his neglecting to dance with her. Take the most serious decision of their lives: to have or not to have a child. Even this decision was not made as people usually made it. Nothing was said about feelings, about the joy of creating a family. All deep human sentiments were eclipsed by considerations of his comfort—too much responsibility, not enough living space, no place for him to work evenings.

True, with Misha, the first child, these considerations were overweighed by the fact of his being the first.

In December, soon after their modest wedding party, Ivan Antonovich asked for a leave of absence and they

went to Leningrad. They returned to Moscow for the New Year and soon it was discovered that Lena was pregnant. Even now Ivan Antonovich could recall the sensations the news evoked in him. For some reason the anticipation of having an heir (and all young fathers assume their first born will be a son) did not bring him joy. Quite the contrary. Why so soon? he thought. I lived a whole year, even longer, with Shura Cherepnina and nothing happened. And here is Lena.... He regretted the loss of their intimacy, their freedom, the opportunity to indulge in the pleasures he considered the prerogative of newlyweds.

These were his thoughts, but they remained unexpressed, he said nothing to Lena—that is, he said something but he did not remember what. Probably he told her he was glad. His gladness, however, found no outward expression, he did not kiss her or embrace her or whirl round the room with her in his arms. He accepted the information communicated to him by his young wife with the gravity becoming a man of affairs and with a proper recognition of his increased responsibility to family and society.

A long-legged, broad-browed boy was born to them, the spitting image of Ivan Antonovich. They called him Misha as Lena desired. Everything seemed capital. But the coming of Misha brought misfortune in its wake. Their crowded conditions in the communal flat and the sleepless nights caused by the infant were as nothing. The greatest misfortune was that soon after the child's birth the doctor found sugar in Lena's blood. At first the diagnosis was diabetes and she was prescribed injections and diet; but the percentage of sugar climbed so catastrophically that the doctor became alarmed. So did Ivan Antonovich. They talked Lena into going to the hospital for observation. By that time she was no longer nursing the baby and Misha could be left in the care of his grandmothers. At first Alevtina Pavlovna, Lena's mother, was touchingly devoted to her grandson. There was something almost droll in the way this elegant and fastidious actress fussed over the year-old child. She was inclined to be noisy and affected in manner, but her besetting sin as an educator was her weakness of will. The child quickly recognised this and took advantage of it,

wearing her out with his capriciousness. He was always making a row: now he refused to take his nap, now he demanded drinking his milk from the bottle he had been given as an infant. At first his grandmother tried cajoling him by turning everything into a game. The game dragged out interminably and it took no more than a month or two to determine who the winner was. Sleeplessness and nerve strain turned the actress into a bundle of nerves, every trifle irritated her, she began shouting at the boy and taking drops to steady her pulse. In the end she came down with a heart attack.

The other grandmother, Anna Dmitrievna, was summoned from Leningrad. She was a stricter and more capable child's nurse. She quickly put the house in order, laundered the heap of dirty clothes, calmly and curtly explained to the child that he must drink from a cup and take a nap and that there was a proper time for all things. He soon became devoted to her and she to him and Anna Dmitrievna lived with them for almost six months, until that dreadful day when news came of the death of her husband in Leningrad.

By that time Lena was discharged from the hospital. The analyses made there did not confirm the doctor's suspicions of the nature of Lena's disease. Her health gradually improved, though for a long time she suffered from the shock of her experience. And not she so much as Ivan Antonovich. He was so frightened and distressed that for the rest of his life he could not hear the word "hospital" without a shiver. When, two years later, the prospect of having a second child became evident, he put down his foot. There were many arguments against it: "First you must be sure of your health, we don't want a repetition of that first experience." "The doctors will know if it's safe. Let them tell me. I've got to see them anyway," said Lena. "But we haven't room for another child," said he, opening attack on the other flank. "Sometimes I have to work at home. Where shall I do it?" "Our room is small," she conceded, "but lots of people live in worse conditions and still have families. In the summer we'll go to the country and in the winter you don't come home from the Institute till late." "No, we'd better wait," said Ivan Antonovich. "Mezentsev has promised to give me a new flat when we finish the

Rybinsk Reservoir. We must wait until then." "It's for you to decide, Vanya," she said. "We women are ruled mostly by our feelings. I love you and want a lot of children like you—long-legged and broad-browed. I'm willing to go through anything for it—doctors and crowded living conditions and sleepless nights. As for the pain, why, I'd let them carve off an ounce of my flesh every day without batting an eye if that was the price demanded." Fearing he would take this as an example of foolish feminine rapture, she added soberly, "Of course one must not be ruled by one's feelings, I know that. I'm selfish too, I thought I could count on the grandmothers to help me; of course it would be hard to manage alone." "That's all right," put in Ivan Antonovich consolingly, "if things go on as they are you'll soon be able to leave your job. Then you'll have nothing to do and can manage the family without any grandmothers."

Lena made no reply. As he escorted her to the hospital she bit her lip to keep from crying. They exchanged not a word on the way. When she came home their relations were chilly for some time, but six months later Lena had good reason to be glad she had not given birth to a second child. War had broken out.

18

Ivan Antonovich did not like to remember those difficult years of war—neither his own life at that time nor Lena's, who was left without his support. The beginning of the war was a muddle for him, and it was a muddle because he lost his head. Everybody lost their heads more or less at that time, but he lost his completely. This was so because he, who for the last few years had been the constant and loyal attendant of Lev Arkadievich Mezentsev, revolving about him as the earth revolves about the sun, suddenly went out of orbit and plunged down into a roaring void that gobbled up everything that came its way.

While German tanks were advancing towards Moscow along the Smolensk Highway, Ivan Antonovich and other engineers at the Institute kept on bending over their desks and drawing-boards. The tall windows of the old

mansion had paper pasted criss-cross on their panes and were closely curtained as soon as dusk set in. During air raids the bark of anti-aircraft guns planted in the former Elizabeth Park and the dull thud of bomb-bursts echoed in the Institute's big hall. Often the men did not descend to the bomb shelter when the siren gave warning of the next air raid, so little time had they to turn in the blueprints for the Rybinsk Power Plant. Twice a week they were taught to march, to handle rifles and bayonets, throw hand grenades and crawl on their bellies. These drills were obligatory for all who had signed up for the volunteers.

When October came and there was talk of the Institute's being evacuated, all volunteers were suddenly called into the yard one morning, formed up in units and their names verified by officers from the regular army. A lorry drove up loaded with brand-new spades with white birch handles. Each unit marched by command to the lorry and each man took a spade and returned to his place in line. Ivan Antonovich sensed something sinister in the brisk, efficient way in which the officers carried out this task, and so, asking permission to go to the toilet, he left his spade in the cloak-room and rushed upstairs to Mezentsev's office on the top floor. The chief was not in; his secretary informed Ivan Antonovich he had been called to the city party committee. What was he to do? For a moment he stood in indecision, then went reluctantly back down the stairs. All office doors stood wide open, people were hurrying anxiously through the corridors, the floor was littered with torn newspapers and bits of tracing-paper. It was sheer chaos. Copyists with whom Lena was friendly rushed past him carrying rolls of drawings in their arms without so much as saying hullo. On the fourth floor where archives were kept men in uniform were trying to put a big metal safe into the lift. It was too wide for the door and the men swore and shouted at one another. As he passed, Ivan Antonovich heard Vekshin call out, "Shut up, there! Try turning it round." Overjoyed, Ivan Antonovich rushed up to him. "What's going on, Fedya? " he said. No sooner were the words out of his mouth than he gasped in amazement: his former classmate was standing in front of him in a new uniform with officer's insignia on the collar.

Vekshin drew him aside and said in a quiet confidential voice, "We've been ordered to evacuate. So far they've given us only five railway coaches. We'll take away documents and some of our equipment first." "And what about me?" Ivan Antonovich wanted to speak these words with dignity, but they came out as a cry for help. Ah, but he was still in orbit. Vekshin, to be sure, was not Mezentsev, but he was Mezentsev's right-hand man, he knew all that was going on and a word from him could do the trick. If he only said: "Wait, don't go away, Mezentsev will be back in fifteen minutes and we'll arrange to have you go with us." Instead Vekshin murmured uncomfortably, "Don't worry, Vanya, you'll spend a week or so digging trenches and when you come back you'll join the second party of evacuees. Lev Arkadievich is at the party committee asking for more coaches for our personnel and their families." Having said this, Vekshin slapped Ivan Antonovich on the back as if they were parting for the day, added, "Good luck!" and pushed him gently towards the stairs. So overwhelmed was Ivan Antonovich that he almost forgot to ask Vekshin to have his wife explain everything to Lena. Vekshin promised and Ivan Antonovich dragged his heavy feet down the stairs and to the cloak-room to get his spade.

The spade was waiting for him. He took it and went out into the yard. The air was full of smoke from burning paper. The volunteers were being assigned to lorries. Ivan Antonovich found his unit and climbed with them into the back of the lorry. All of the lorries moved out of the yard into the street. The gloomy façades of the houses swept past them. Ivan Antonovich did not know Moscow very well and for some time could not tell where he was being taken. Only as they were passing through Kuntsevo did he realise they were going west, along the old Mozhaisk Highway. He lost all track of time; German fighter planes with yellow crosses on the wings sometimes appeared over their column, the lorries would then stop, somebody would frantically call out, "Air alert", the men would hastily climb out, falling and swearing. When the planes had emptied their machine-guns and flown away the unit and company commanders would rush up and down the road trying to collect their men.

At about noon as they were leaving a half-burned village, they were stopped by a road patrol. The road in front of them was full of shell craters. They climbed out of the lorries and for another two hours or so marched along the side of the road, at the edge of a woods. The grass, blighted by an early snowfall, crunched under their feet. From up ahead came the dull blast of exploding shells and the chatter of machine-guns. Ivan Antonovich dragged along at the end of his unit. Never before had he felt so lonely and miserable. His feet were wet. His expensive coat, which he had taken such good care of and had always hung on a hanger at the office, was smeared with the mud of a ditch he had lain face-down in when the column was being strafed by Messerschmitts.

The woods abruptly came to an end. In front of them stretched a field and from the crest of a low hill they could see people digging anti-tank ditches in the middle of this field. The officers escorting their column gathered for a consultation. Then they divided the volunteers into two groups; the larger group was left on the hillside; the unit to which Ivan Antonovich belonged was marched ahead. Further on, on the other side of the highway, stood three or four little houses with a ravine behind them, at the bottom of which wound the black ribbon of a little rivulet clamped in ice. The unit was put up in one of these houses and each of its members was supplied with a tin of meat and a portion of bread. While they lunched a captain in a uniform greatcoat, too short for him and much the worse for wear, explained what they were to do. He was not specific about the situation at the front; he did not tell them that the Germans had broken through Soviet defences near Mozhaisk that very night; he only said that heavy fighting was going on and the Germans were making frantic efforts to reach the capital. The task facing the volunteers was to prevent German tanks from breaking through. They had to make the highway impassable by digging anti-tank ditches and nests for mine-throwers.

When they had finished eating the captain showed them where and how to dig and they set to working till dark. The next day they began at dawn and finished at sundown. The third day they did the same. At the end of this third day their unit commander came and told them to put down their spades and line up.

They clambered up the steep clay sides of the anti-tank ditch and found they had no time to line up. The commander waved in the direction of the highway and they made for it in disorder. Lorries covered with tarpaulins were waiting for them. Men were streaming towards them from all directions—students, workers, engineers—in coats and jackets streaked with earth, none of them in uniform; nobody asked them their names or the names of the organisations in which they had signed up for the volunteers; from the darkness under the tarpaulins soldiers thrust rifles into their hands and whispered to each of them. "That's all. Go back." And they went back and lined up in their units to wait for their comrades, who had gone to bring zinc boxes of cartridges and hand grenades from other lorries.

Ivan Antonovich found his rifle heavier than he had expected. It was, however, a pleasure to feel the smooth cool surface of the butt after the rough spade-handle that had worn blisters on his hands. He felt safer with the rifle. Safer and—what was it? —more useful, perhaps. At any rate, his companions looked more respectable, less ragamuffin, standing in line and at attention.

After explaining to them that groups of German submachine-gunners had penetrated our lines, their commander posted the sentries for the night and the exhausted men lay down to sleep on the floor of the unheated village house.

At dawn they stacked their rifles and picked up their spades again. The highway was by this time gashed with ditches. Now they dug nests for machine-gun emplacements and shelters for men along the edge of the field and the woods. Snow began to fall. The clay was wet and heavy. Ivan Antonovich was beset by worries. The institute had been evacuated—to what place? Probably Siberia or the Urals. That meant he had been cut off from them and his work for a long time. Where was Lena? Did she know he was digging ditches? It would have been better if he had been called to the regular army, like everybody else. He would be in the engineers and give commands like that captain. Instead, here he was wielding this confounded spade.

His glasses were a great nuisance. With every blow of the spade they jumped up and settled lower on his nose.

He kept pushing them back, smudging his face with dirt, which added an element of comedy to his disreputable appearance.

On the previous evening a group of artillerymen had mounted their guns above the river a little distance from the highway. From time to time shells would whistle overhead directed towards the Germans, but the sound of explosions could not be heard through the surrounding roar and clatter. Heretofore the field kitchen had brought them dinner at noon, but for some reason it did not turn up on this day and that, perhaps, was why the men felt colder and more desolate than ever. It stopped snowing by noon and everything began to freeze. The clouds lifted, revealing a blue sky.

Out of the woods where the battery was mounted came communications men headed for the frontline with their spools of wire. There was a tense look on their faces. Andrei Olkhovsky, an engineer from their department whom Ivan Antonovich had got to know better here at the ditch-digging, stopped one of the communications men and asked him for a light. "See that 'crate' up there? In a minute the Fritzes'll give you a light you won't forget! " said the man, pointing to a spot above a birch copse on the opposite side of the highway where a German reconnaissance plane was buzzing away harmlessly. It appeared so suddenly one wondered when and how it had got there. Presently someone shouted, "Air alert! " The volunteers snatched up their guns and began shooting but the "crate" went on buzzing as if the shots were not aimed at it; now it dipped out of sight below the rim of the woods, now it soared up into the clouds.

When it had accomplished its purpose it disappeared. No sooner had its buzzing died away than from the direction of the front came an ominous roar. "What could it be? Tanks? " Ivan Antonovich put his rifle on the grass and, taking up his spade, began digging hurriedly: he must deepen this fox-hole! Before he had thrown out two or three spadefuls a flock of German planes—about two dozen in wedge formation—came sailing out from behind the black pines that rose like a wall at the other end of the field. For some reason Ivan Antonovich assumed that their holes and ditches were of no significance to the enemy and the planes were headed for a

spot deep in the rear. And so he just stood there watching them through his dirty spectacles.

The planes were flying high, but when they reached the field the first wedge turned on its sirens and dived down; at the same time the wedges behind it rose one above another, forming a sort of Ferris wheel, and this wheel, with the wail of dozens of motors and sirens, was headed directly for Ivan Antonovich, pressing to the ground every live thing—woods, people, even grass. Andrei Olkhovsky, who was standing beside him, shouted, "Lie down! " Before he had time to get the words out Ivan Antonovich had ducked into the fox-hole he had just made. The hole was not deep. He hid his head in it but his feet were exposed. Damn it all, I can get killed because of my own laziness, he thought in desperation. If I'd dug it my height I'd have a chance. The very instant this thought flashed through his mind a red-black cloud rose in front of him as if from out of the bowels of the earth. He noticed his spade, which he had stuck into the heap of clay at the edge of the hole, soaring into the air along with the clay.

Then: Bang! Ta-ta-ta! Bang!

He longed to be enclosed in the earth's cold womb. And as he lay pressing himself with all his strength into the damp earth he reviewed his whole life, much as he was reviewing it this endless night in the armchair. In the fox-hole he had seen it all in a brief flash. But at that time there had been less to see. Much less.

And that "much less" might have been cut off for all time in that fox-hole, thought Ivan Antonovich with a wry smile. All the life given me afterwards has been a sort of bonus.

19

It was thanks to a German bomb splinter that he received this bonus. The wound was serious, affecting his knee cap and requiring long treatment. He was sent to hospitals deep in the rear, first in Kazan, later in Kemerovo.

Almost all of the men he had dug ditches with along the Mozhaisk Highway were killed. He was told this six

months later by Andrei Olkhovsky, whom he met by chance in Kemerovo. From the window of his ward he could see a wire fence enclosing a school yard, beyond which was a narrow field with a few birches on it and the Tom River gleaming blackly at its far end. Until then—that is, until he found himself in this hospital—he had not known he was so fond of rivers. He had taken them for granted. The Tom, too, at first. But when, after four months of lying motionless, the doctor took the plaster cast off his leg and told him he could walk a little every day, he seized his crutches greedily at one and the same hour daily (immediately after the doctor had done his rounds) and hobbled to the window to get a glimpse of the Tom. Even during the hard frosts of January the river did not freeze over entirely. In the middle where the current flowed swiftest there were patches of black rippling water from which steam rose. There's power gone to waste! exclaimed Ivan Antonovich to himself. I wonder if a dam could be built on these banks, and he surveyed them with an expert eye.

Gradually his train of thought shifted from the river to Lena and his son and his colleagues at the office. Lena had written him that his Institute had been evacuated to the east, she could not say exactly where. He ended every letter to her with, "Where is Mezentsev? Where is Vekshin?" To these most vital questions she offered unsatisfactory answers. She knew nothing at all of the whereabouts of Mezentsev and as for the Vekshins, with whom they had been friendly, she knew they were not in Moscow. "I believe Fedya's wife has joined her mother in Sverdlovsk and he himself is working as an engineer somewhere in the north, he is not at the front." She had plenty of things to think of without worrying about Vekshin and Mezentsev. Her sisters had left Moscow along with the theatrical troupes they belonged to and Lena's sick mother was with her. Lena had to earn money to keep the three of them, in addition to which she had to get the meals, clean and run the house. She did not complain in her letters. She wrote that her job kept her busy all day long, but even so she climbed up on the roof during night air raids along with other women who were members of the self-defence team to put out incendiary bombs.

Somehow things had taken the wrong turn for them. Ivan Antonovich ought to have been called into the regular army. Then he would have worn two squares on his collar indicating he was an officer, for at the end of his military training as a student he was given the rank of lieutenant in the engineers. As an officer he could have had part of his salary sent to Lena and she would not have suffered such deprivations throughout the war. And perhaps....

Perhaps she would have lived longer. This was the first time the idea had occurred to him that Lena had suffered more from the war than he had. While the war was on, even when standing at the window of the hospital and gazing out at the Tom, he had but the vaguest conception of what her life was like in Moscow with a small child and a sick mother on her hands. His efforts to be accepted in the army as a lieutenant in the engineers were motivated mostly by feelings of pride and the desire to have justice done him. At times he felt indignant, at others furious, that he should be reduced to such position. He was a "white raven" among the rank and file. He was not even issued a uniform. The coat and mended shoes he had been wearing when he left the Institute that memorable October morning were still his only apparel; in them he travelled from one hospital to another. He was paid no salary and lay in a common ward along with a dozen other wounded soldiers. A stuffy ward with insufficient service; you could ring your bell all night without having anyone come to attend to your needs!

Ivan Antonovich wrote and asked Lena to send him his army-service card, his passport and copy of his diploma. When he received them he sent them to military headquarters in Novosibirsk. He was informed he would be paid for the present as a simple soldier and the question of his being given his rightful rank would be decided when he was dismissed from the hospital.

So for the present the only improvement he enjoyed was a small salary and a cigarette ration. But all the same he felt out of place among these soldiers mutilated at the front. In the evenings, when the doctors and nurses were through with them, they spent their time talking about the war.

"Here's Fritz making for us in tanks. So we—piff! piff! Then the bloody stinker comes at us from both sides. Tries to encircle us. Jesus, you'd ought to have heard our commander cuss! We went into attack. Broke through."

Such talk always made Ivan Antonovich feel uneasy. These men had held Smolensk and taken Yelnya, he had done nothing. What could be recount to them—how he had dug ditches? A joke! Now he was getting the same pay and cigarette ration as they and was thankful for it. But to be strictly fair, he had not earned it; yet here he had been for four long months, fed and sheltered and given medical care.

As soon as the doctor gave him permission to go for walks Ivan Antonovich took his coat out of storage and hung it in the wardrobe. Whenever he felt the need of fresh air he would put his coat on over his hospital pajamas and go down into the yard. Soon he was sick of walking in the yard and began hobbling on his crutches to the bank of the Tom. One Sunday, when there was no routine medical inspection and treatment, he went out directly after breakfast. The old woman on guard at the hospital entrance knew him by this time and let him out without argument.

He immediately turned down to the river. The ice was breaking up but had not begun moving down stream. The thawing earth made a sucking noise under his feet, his crutches sank in the mud, he found it hard going. Frequently he stopped and turned his face to the sun, enjoying the warmth of it. Larks were singing in the sky. Streams were gurgling. Children were playing on the riverbank. Little girls were jumping rope and playing hopscotch; little boys were leaping over puddles and from one ice floe to another at the river's edge. The water was rising rapidly. The air was filled with the noise of splitting ice, the world was bright and sunny. All this brightness and sunshine and animation evoked an upsurge of strength in Ivan Antonovich, and he walked on and on along the riverbank until he was far beyond the town. As he passed by a birch copse he drew in deep breaths of air fragrant with thawing earth, leaf mold and fresh buds. The place he found himself in must have been a park in summer for there were summer-houses under the

birches and benches down by the water. He chose a comfortable bench in the sun and sat down. The scene was quiet and empty. Starlings were strutting importantly on elevated spots where the snow had melted and grass was springing. Having nothing better to do, Ivan Antonovich began studying them. They moved in clusters, not yet in pairs, anxiously searching the ground until they found something to peck at. At the slightest sign from their leader they flew up with a noisy flutter of wings, circled overhead, then came back to the sun-warmed spot.

So absorbed in his observation was he that he did not immediately hear cries coming from the river. "Help! Help! " came in a thin voice that might have been a child's or a woman's.

Ivan Antonovich picked up his crutches and half ran, half hopped, in the direction the cries were coming from. Presently he saw five or six little boys on an ice floe some two hundred metres downstream that was slowly tearing away from the riverbank. They were running about the floe shouting and waving their arms. Ivan Antonovich, leaning mostly on his good leg, hurried towards them. Before he had gone a hundred metres he caught sight of one of the boys in the water. At the same time another man was running towards them with a board under his arm. It was to him the boys were calling. Ivan Antonovich looked round for a convenient place to descend and, finding a path, began to descend but could not keep his balance, fell and slid down it in the mud. The other man who was running to save the drowning child appeared to be from the hospital too; he was unshaved and his worn uniform greatcoat must have been too small for him because he wore it thrown over his shoulders without putting his arms into it and buttoning it up. He lifted the board and tried to put it between the bank and the ice floe. The board was wet and apparently very heavy.

"Here, let me help," said Ivan Antonovich, putting all his weight on his good leg as he bent down. Only then did he notice that the other man had only one arm; the right sleeve of his tunic was empty. "Here goes! " and Ivan Antonovich, forgetting about his wounded leg, seized the board with both hands and flung it out so that its far end fell on the floe. The boys instantly ran across it to the

shore and the boy in the water clutched at it with red hands and pulled himself out.

The little monkey, said Ivan Antonovich to himself as he watched the child. I had better give him a thrashing to make him run home as fast as his legs will carry him.

"You just made it," said the other man, as he pulled his coat round his shoulders. "Me with my one arm, I could hardly manage the board—wet and slippery."

"I was sitting there on a bench when I heard the shouting. I made for the river—" Ivan Antonovich, who had been rinsing his hands in the water, picked up his crutches and straightened up, and as he did so he looked into the stranger's face. The latter was staring at him in joy and astonishment. In a sudden burst of recognition Ivan Antonovich started forward and cried: "Andrei! Andrei Olkhovsky! "

20

They embraced and stood looking at each other a while, then they climbed back up the high bank and found a bench to sit on and when Ivan Antonovich had helped Olkhovsky roll a cigarette, they told each other all that had happened to them since they last met. That is, Olkhovsky told all that had happened to him, for Ivan Antonovich had nothing to tell; Olkhovsky had been the one who had pulled him out of the fox-hole and had him sent to hospital.

As it turned out, on the evening of the very day that Ivan Antonovich and other wounded volunteers were despatched to the rear, their unit was caught in enemy encirclement. With nothing but rifles and hand grenades they fought the well-armed Germans until dark.

Then they broke up into small groups and made for the woods. Many of their colleagues at the Institute were killed in that fight. Andrei Olkhovsky was lucky: on the fifth day of hiding in the woods he met some Soviet soldiers who had fought their way out of encirclement near Smolensk. Their commander was an artillery captain who had been at the front from the first day of war and was experienced in making his way through enemy lines. In the daytime they placed sentries and rested in the

woods, at night they made their way towards their own lines, fighting when necessary. In one such skirmish Olkhovsky was shot in the right wrist as he was in the act of throwing a hand grenade. At first the wound seemed light, but on the second day he had such a high fever he could not go on with the others. The captain decided he was to be left behind for our forces to pick up when they reached the spot. He was taken care of in the home of a woman whose husband was at the front. Olkhovsky did not remember either the name of the village or of the woman who had nursed him, for he was delirious throughout his stay. On the third day our forces arrived. He was sent to hospital, but gangrene had set in and the arm could not be saved.

Olkhovsky bemoaned the fact that he could no longer be a designer. "I can't even roll a cigarette, let alone draw blue-prints," he said. When the talk turned to their profession, Ivan Antonovich naturally thought of Mezentsev. Where was he? Olkhovsky was better informed than Lena, he said both Mezentsev and Vekshin were in the Far North working on Construction Site No. 501 in Salekhard. Lev Arkadievich was assistant chief of construction and Fedya Vekshin was head of the hydraulic group.

When it got late Olkhovsky went back to his hospital, situated in the former sanatorium that had belonged to metal workers, and Ivan Antonovich to his, which was a converted school-house. That same evening Ivan Antonovich had the nurse bring him some writing materials and he sent a letter to Salekhard saying he was in the volunteers, had been badly wounded but was almost recovered, and asking Mezentsev to send for him if it was in any way possible.

The days dragged out interminably until a reply came. In the middle of April, when Ivan Antonovich had exchanged his crutches for a cane, he got a wire from Mezentsev saying that all the documents necessary for summoning Ivan Antonovich to their construction job had been forwarded to Military Headquarters in Novosibirsk and everything now rested with the medical commission: if Ivan Antonovich was found fit for army service he would be assigned to Vekshin as a member of his hydraulic group. That same week Ivan Antonovich receiv-

ed a summons to Novosibirsk. The medical commission pronounced him fit for army service, he was given a uniform and money, and he left for Salekhard on the next plane.

Service in the Far North could not be compared with that at the front. True, there was a deficiency of food, they lived in dug-outs or draughty prefab houses and worked twelve hours at a stretch in bitter cold, but their lives were not in danger every hour, every minute, as were the lives of men at the front. Even so, as he recalled his experiences he knew that if, like Lena, he was not destined to live out his allotted span, it would be because of those less than three years spent in the Far North. The mere recollection of the Polar nights, of the digging of holes in the ice of the Ob River by the light of the aurora borealis, made little chills run up and down his back. "Brr! " He snuggled down under his covers. Yes, the boring of holes in two-metre ice when the temperature of the air was forty below zero was a devilish task. But the worst thing about it was that they saw no point in it. The Germans were at Maikop; fierce battles were being fought at Stalingrad; tension was at its height, every man was needed at the front, and here were they with a hundred soldiers under their command, boring holes in all the northern rivers, from the Ob to the Yenisei, measuring the depth of the water and the speed of the currents. What for?

They did not know, and nothing was as hard to bear as the sense of the uselessness of their labours. Many years later Ivan Antonovich learned that in the wake of the hydrologists came thousands of workers to build a railway in that desolate and rugged clime, designed according to the data supplied by the hydrologists.

Day after day, month after month—holes, measurements, long trips by dog-sled, insufficient and monotonous food. At times it seemed impossible to go on. He felt he would rather climb into one of those two-metre holes in the ice and go to sleep forever than get up the next morning and begin all over again. In the end he fell ill. At first with scurvy; he was overcome by weakness, his gums began to bleed and his teeth came loose. But almost all of the men had scurvy and it was not looked upon as a serious disease. Then his body became covered

with red blotches. He was sent from Labytnangi to Salekhard for treatment. In Salekhard there were no skin specialists. The doctors decided the spots were caused by an allergy. They put him in hospital and gave him powders, but on the third or fourth day the spots turned into ulcers. They called a consultation, as a result of which he was sent that very day to Omsk in a plane delivering crates of frozen fish. From Omsk he went by train to Irkutsk.

And so Ivan Antonovich found himself for the second time in hospital.

It was in the military hospital in Irkutsk that he had the good fortune to meet Klavdia Nikolayevna Lavrukhina, a woman who selflessly gave him her love without asking for the usual promises, concessions, vows of loyalty. Klavdia was an exceptional woman. Why only Klavdia? thought Ivan Antonovich sadly: all the women who had loved him, even Shura Cherepnina, were stronger than he was. Stronger in spirit, willpower and self-renunciation. Klavdia Nikolayevna was particularly so.

She worked as a dentist in the hospital to which he was sent. Had she been another sort of doctor, he and she might never have grown so close. Being a dentist, she treated his scurvy. Almost every day she examined him. Almost every day he felt the touch of her hands when, before beginning the examination, she took his head in them and said, "Turn a little more to the right. That's it." He would gladly have turned and twisted his head for hours for the pleasure of feeling those soft warm hands on his cheeks. No other woman, neither before nor after her, had such hands. Warm and soft. So warm that he was seared by their touch.

21

Ivan Antonovich despised those who spoke banalities to women they hardly knew. It was, he believed, ill-bred to flirt, to talk about expressive eyes and beautiful hands. He did, however, make an exception in respect to Klavdia Nikolayevna. Once when the nurse who assisted her went out of the room he told her her hands were wonderfully soft and warm. Her eyes, usually sad, lighted

up and she smiled; for a moment her hands lingered on his face, then, as if ashamed, she said briskuely, "Open your mouth." When she had swabbed his gums as usual, she put down her instrument and said with a sigh, "You just imagine it." He could have said nothing or just lifted his shoulders in mute apology, but he did not do so, he confessed the sacred truth to her: every touch of her hand seared his soul. She grew silent and thoughtful and again the sadness came into her eyes. "Nobody has ever told me that before," she said. "I will remember it." And with a suggestion of coyness she put her hands on his cheeks. "Well? Do they sear? "

"They do," he said, and impulsively took them in his own and began kissing them.

It was done foolishly, childishly; she pulled her hands away and walked over to the window. He turned in the chair and watched her. He could not see her face, but he saw her shoulders with the white doctor's smock spanning them tightly. They were feminine slightly sloping shoulders, but suddenly they went up sharply, like a teenager's, and it appeared to him that she was crying. He got up and took a step towards her, but she, sensing it, said sharply, "You may go, I have finished with you." He stood in indecision for a moment, then, with a muttered apology, went to the door. She did not turn round.

It seemed nothing of importance had taken place between them; on the surface their relationship remained unchanged. When the time of his next appointment came, Ivan Antonovich went to the dentist's office, sat down in the chair, shut his eyes against the bright light and waited while Klavdia Nikolayevna washed her hands. She washed them at the basin, wiped them as she came towards him, put her fingers under his chin and said, "Open your mouth." He opened it, she swabbed the ulcers on his gums, tried the firmness of his teeth with her pincers, sometimes frowned with dissatisfaction, sometimes smiled with pleasure and said, "Much better, we'll soon have you well." When the treatment was over she went to the writing table and entered her notes in his case history, saying casually as she wrote, "You may go, I've finished with you."

So it was once, twice, three times. Then he noticed that when he came into the office she always found

some reason to send the nurse away. This would have encouraged any other man to make advances. It had the opposite effect on Ivan Antonovich. He sat stiffly in the chair, afraid of giving any sign of the excitement the touch of her hands roused in him, a breath-taking excitement that grew with every day. In the end she took the initiative.

Once when he had got up out of the chair and she, after washing her hands, had gone to the writing table to make her entry, she turned to the first page and said in surprise, "It seems you come from Leningrad, Ivan Antonovich." "Yes," he answered briefly (after the swabbing his teeth ached and his gums were bleeding and it cost him an effort to come out with even that "yes"). "So do I," she said. "You don't mean it! " In his pleasure he forgot all about his bleeding gums.

It would be hard to find citizens who take the pride in their city the natives of Leningrad do. Ivan Antonovich was no exception. He was overjoyed to discover they were both from Leningrad, and so was she. This time she did not say curtly, "You may go, I've finished with you". She pushed out a chair and motioned toward it.

Ivan Antonovich sat down and they had a long talk. They told each other where they had lived, they recalled the Leningrad seashore, the "headland", the museums; and these common memories drew them together more than declarations of their feelings could have. Klavdia Nikolayevna had come to Siberia three years before the war. Why? Had she been assigned to her job here? Had she come of her own accord? She did not say. It was here in Siberia, before the outbreak of the war, her husband had died. When, during the war, a number of military hospitals were opened in Irkutsk, she was assigned as a dentist to one of them. For over two years she had been working here, the administration was pleased with her work and had promised to give her and her daughter a room of their own in a communal flat.

Ivan Antonovich was deeply affected by what she told him, and in the light of it his little flirtation (about her fingers searing his soul) seemed frivolous and insulting. Klavdia Nikolayevna, however, had taken his advances differently. "In the six years I've lived in Irkutsk no

one has spoken a tender word to me," she confessed. "And when you said that about my hands, the words went to my very soul. I am grateful to you for them." He attempted to apologise but she would not let him. "No, no. I am not sentimental and I know how to keep myself in hand. But your sincerity and impulsiveness completely disarmed me."

This conversation changed everything between them. They became friends.

His stay in the hospital was coming to an end. Thanks to Klavdia Nikolayevna his gums stopped bleeding and became firm, the ulcers on his body turned out to be of a rheumatic nature and after medicinal baths and quartz treatments they disappeared entirely. Two days before he came up before the medical commission he was issued a uniform. He put on all his new clothes and went to see Klavdia Nikolayevna. After work he saw her home. She invited him in, introduced him to her daughter, and the three of them sat round the table having tea and talking till late at night.

The medical board declared him fit with certain reservations and Klavdia Nikolayevna (as she confessed a year later, when they were parting for good) made it possible for him not to return to Vekshin's unit in the Far North but to remain working in the Irkutsk office where exploratory work was being carried on along the Angara River and the entire district of Lake Baikal. The groups engaged in this work were small in number, the amount of work great, and the locations scattered over an enormous area. Whenever Ivan Antonovich came back from a trip to one of these locations he went to see Klavdia Nikolayevna.

Once when he returned from the Baikal dead tired, dirty and unshaved, she urged him to stay with her instead of going to his room in the hostel.

He did.

From that time on and throughout the entire year he worked in Irkutsk, he and Klavdia saw much of each other. No other woman had been so kind, responsive, tender even as she. She knew he was married and had a family and she made no claims on him. The one thing she did want was a child by him. In their intimate moments, which occurred more often with Klavdia than

with any other woman, he confessed he loved her. In response she whispered endearments that he did not immediately catch the meaning of. She ardently pressed him not to be afraid. Life was so short! May be it's her last love! So let him not be afraid. Let there be a child. She would take care of it. She was working and could support it. What if she was a lone mother? She wanted this memory of him that would last all her life. Soon he would no longer belong to her; the child would be a part of him she could keep.

Ivan Antonovich, however, did not want a child and was intimidated by her resoluteness. The only consolation he had was that she was a doctor and understood what she was doing. With every day he became more devoted to her and there was a time when he seriously thought of joining his life to hers permanently. Perhaps he would have done so and remained in Irkutsk, but he could not live without his work. The scale of his activities in Irkutsk did not satisfy him: the only place where he could work on a large scale was in his Institute in Moscow, which, as Lena informed him, had returned from evacuation. Work always took first place in Ivan Antonovich's life. Klavdia knew this, and when he received a summons to return to Moscow she did not deter him.

22

Ivan Antonovich could hardly remember his first meeting with Lena after the war. As he searched his mind, he discovered he could not recall what she was wearing when she met him at the station, what he said to her, and in general how he behaved. It was not only their first meeting he had forgotten; he could not remember whole periods of their life together.

My nerves are unstrung, he said to himself. Perhaps I ought to stay home tomorrow—take another day or two off.

He lighted up, thinking this would help him pull himself together, but after a puff or two he forgot all about the cigarette.

No doubt the reason why he could not remember their first meeting was that Lena embraced him not in

the Byelorussian Station, where all the soldiers returning triumphant from the front were embraced, but in the Yaroslavsky Station; he arrived from Siberia, from deep in the rear. The station was empty and ordinary, and his home-coming was as from a two-week business trip rather than a four-year separation. When he first set eyes on Lena, who met him with flowers and in her best clothes, but looking rather distraught, he could hardly keep from crying out, "How old you've grown, darling! " Her hair was greying, her neck was lined and sagging; from a distance she gave the impression of being a neat and respectable middle-aged woman. Misha stood beside her, a big boy in a white shirt and well-pressed shorts. He did not run to the coach on catching sight of his father as his mother did, he did not hug and kiss him, but approached with dignity, said hullo, took the heavy bag out of his hand (in which books about the Angara River were packed next to food rations) and asked in imitation of older boys, "Did you bring me some cedar cones from Siberia, dad? " He was indeed a big boy now; he was in the second form.

They came home and Ivan Antonovich found himself in the room he had left to enter the volunteers. It was a hot June day. Lena changed into a faded dress that dated to before the war and busied herself preparing food and laying the table. Neighbours came in who, like Lena, had carried on without their men, had fed and clothed their children and extinguished German incendiary bombs on the roofs. Those whose husbands would never come back shed tears at the sight of the live and unmutilated Ivan Antonovich. Then all of them had a drink and talked about their experiences during the war until after midnight.

June nights are short. On this short night the weary heart-sick woman found time to tell him all about her lonely life. Men cannot go on like this; women can. Men are inclined to fall asleep. At first Ivan Antonovich encouraged her with little responses, then he dozed off, went to sleep and woke up to find her still talking.

During the war she had worked at an aircraft factory. In October 1941, when he had gone off with the volunteers, Moscow seemed half empty. But when the Hitler armies were driven back life returned to the city. Ivan

Antonovich's Institute was evacuated; for a whole month not a word was received from her husband. What was she to do? She had her little boy and sick mother on her hands. Her neighbour, the practical-minded wife of engineer Fateyev, found out that a certain aircraft factory needed employees for its dining-room. They went together to apply and the neighbour was taken on as a waitress, Lena as an assistant in the supply room. She remained there only a year. As soon as Ivan Antonovich went to work in the North he sent her money and she got a job as a draughtsman in the designing department of the factory.

"What didn't I see in that place!" she said, referring to the dining-room. "Special tables were reserved for the officers who came from the front for assignments of planes. The waitresses, some of them young girls, others the wives of men at the front, kowtowed to the manager for the right to serve the officers' tables. There was one named Nyura—a vivacious red-head with a big belly (she was in her sixth month). She bound her belly flat with a towel and went swinging her hips down the length of the dining-room. During the war she gave birth to three babies. The other waitresses would ask her who the father was—that black-haired major? And she'd just shrug her shoulders: "Who knows? They're all nice young men."

Ivan Antonovich, who had been half asleep up to this moment, was suddenly wide awake.

"The little bitch," he said. "Had she no husband? I suppose her husband was at the front and here she was...."

Lena, noticing his excitement, broke off, as if asking herself whether she hadn't pushed matters a little too far.

"I don't know whether she had a husband or not," she went on calmly. "But I don't know why you should take it so hard. You seem to think it a great crime; she was only satisfying her natural instinct, the most powerful instinct of all. If it wasn't for this 'crime' there'd be no life on earth."

Ivan Antonovich snorted in reply.

"You're so old-fashioned in your ideas, Vanya," she said, pressing close to him. "How could I have married such an old fogey?" She laughed and added happily, "I'm very glad I did. One feels safe with you. Are you

sure you were true to me all that time in Siberia? You were, weren't you?"

As usual when he found himself in a tight fix, Ivan Antonovich tried to evade the issue by maintaining silence, but Lena would not let him. "Tell me," she insisted. "I want to hear from your own lips that you were true to me." Sleepy and mellow with wine, he embraced her and murmured, "You know what you mean to me ... my good, kind Klav-" He broke off, having almost pronounced the name of the woman he had caressed in parting only a week before.

Lena pretended not to have noticed his slip and in no way betrayed her suspicions, neither by questioning or reproving him or making insinuations. After that he took great care not to call his wife Klavdia by mistake. But soon it all came out in the most unexpected and silly fashion.

The next morning, washed and shaved, he set out for the Institute. Mezentsev and Vekshin were in their offices. Lev Arkadievich received him with open arms and explained in detail just how things stood; preparatory work on the Volga-Don Canal was in full swing and he was "devilishly in need" of reliable assistants, as he always put it. He instantly made Ivan Antonovich head of a department.

Life quickly fell into a satisfactory routine and all would have been well but for his longing for Klavdia. This wore him out. He could not concentrate and he became nervous and irritable. Never could he have believed that, living with one woman, he could long so for another.

When he could stand it no longer he wrote to Klavdia. He told her about his journey to Moscow and the arrangement of his life here and thanked her for all she had done for him. Of course he did not tell her he missed her: he did not know how to express his feelings on paper. On paper? With his head on the same pillow, he could not tell his beloved he loved her! Despite this the letter turned out to be warm and genial. In closing he asked Klavdia to write him poste restante to a branch post-office near his Institute—that is, if she bore him no grievance.

A week or two later he was overjoyed to be handed a letter from her. He instantly opened and read it. Deep-

ly was he touched by her solicitude and tenderness—that of a sister to a beloved brother. She wrote that she was as one lost for some time after he left, but that gradually the pain had subsided and now she was giving herself up wholely to her work. As never before she realised how right he had been in leaving: love for a woman, however great, cannot take the place of a man's life work. She thanked him for his kindness to her and even sent a greeting to his wife.

Happy that things had turned out so well, Ivan Antonovich thrust the letter in his coat pocket and went home, full of the joyful anticipation of rereading it the next day when he would be alone in his office.

It was customary in their family to make no secret of correspondence. Letters and cards from friends and relatives were read aloud or by each of them separately. Nor did they make any secret of money received, as is done in some families. All of them knew the amount and in which drawer of the writing-table it was kept. They lived openly, keeping back nothing from one another.

The next morning as Ivan Antonovich was setting out Lena, as always, saw him to the door, straightened his tie and brushed a speck off his collar. He put his hat on in front of the looking-glass—couldn't for the life of him get used to wearing a hat after so many years of an officer's cap.

"You need a clean handkerchief. Here, give me your soiled one and I'll bring a clean one."

"That's right." He began searching his pockets for the handkerchief. Not here. Not here. Here it is—the handkerchief in his hand, the letter on the floor.

He quickly bent down and picked it up, flushing beet-red, like a schoolboy.

Lena looked at him intently. As he pushed the letter back into his pocket with a trembling hand she shook her head reprovingly.

"It's from a colleague in Irkutsk ... nothing particular in it," he hastened to say.

"Then why should you be so anxious to hide it? "

"Here, you can read it if you like. There's regards to you in it." But he did not take the letter out of his pocket.

"Did you tell her you had a wife and son?" she asked softly so that Misha, who was having breakfast in the kitchen, should not hear.

"What crazy ideas get into your head, Lena!" he said and made an attempt to embrace her, but she pushed his arm away.

She pushed his arm away and said, with the same reproving shake of her head, "You men! A woman opens her soul to you, thinking you're worthy of it, only to find out you're brutes. Wolves." She thrust the clean handkerchief into his hand and, fighting back the tears, went into the kitchen.

23

The strained relations caused by the letter did not, however, last long. Soon thereafter they were given a new flat, and in the joy and excitement induced by so great and much-desired a change, they gradually forgot the hurt of this incident.

The move was a holiday in their lives, it was a return to their youth. After their crowded conditions, the inconveniences of a shared kitchen, the constant bickering with neighbours over the proper apportioning of payments for gas and electricity, the new flat of which they were the sole occupants was like paradise. They were in the same high spirits in which they first set out in life together.

On the insistence of Ivan Antonovich Lena left her job at the aircraft factory and gave herself up entirely to housekeeping. At first she delighted in it. It was only many years later, when she was beginning to suffer from ill health, that the loneliness of her life weighed on her and she spoke of the kitchen as her prison cell. When they first moved, however, her delight in the three-room flat knew no bounds and she devoted herself enthusiastically to furnishing it with taste. She wanted it to be a home to which Ivan Antonovich could come after an exhausting day and find rest in an armchair with a book. She chose her furniture and lighting fixtures with care and gave individuality to the rooms by adding bright bits of pottery. When finished, her flat was every whit as

attractive as the Vekshins', who had just moved into a similar flat on a lower floor of the same house.

In those days Ivan Antonovich often invited friends from the office for an evening. They came with their wives and children and Lena went out of her way to prepare nice food for them. Today, when, at the funeral feast, Mezentsev and Olkhovsky had recalled her culinary achievements, it was those days they were thinking of. After the loneliness and deprivations of wartime, Lena had enjoyed an upsurge of energy, a revival of youth. At times Ivan Antonovich had felt life was just beginning for them.

And so it was. What had they known before the war? Only four years of life together. In 1946 everything lay ahead. Everything. They were not old; Lena was thirty-four, he was forty-two.

The new house was at the edge of town and, as has been said, near a ravine with an open field stretching beyond to the very horizon. At one spot the ravine had been filled in to form a crossing; a pavement had been laid following the highway. The asphalt of this pavement had cracks in it through which the grass sprouted in the spring. On warm spring Sundays the three of them would follow this walk, which led to a village and a church; here they would come after dinner instead of taking a nap and feel that they were practically in the country. Dandelions grew profusely on the steep slopes of the ravine and frogs croaked in ditches from which clay had been extracted for a brick works not far away.

The atmosphere would be languorous from the warmth and the awakening. Lena was thrilled by even this poor representation of nature. She gave voice to her dream that when Ivan Antonovich retired they would buy a house on the Oka River and live alone in the woods. "We'll get up early in the morning and plant flowers and we'll have a dog and a cat and chickens...." Suddenly she broke off, "Gracious, what am I dreaming of? Old age! How absurd to dream of being put on the shelf! We're still young, aren't we, Vanya?" and she snuggled close to him and whispered in his ear so that Misha, who was walking ahead, should not hear. "If I dream of having a house in the country it's not cats and dogs I want disturbing the silence, but children; let's

have lots of children, Vanya. What's one child? —One child doesn't make a family. When we're gone he'll have no sisters or brothers to keep him company, be all alone in the world, poor chap. Well? "

"Well what? " said Ivan Antonovich, who had been wondering how much earth it had taken to fill in the ravine at the spot they were crossing; his Institute was building the Tsimlyansk Power Plant at the time and he thought how many more cubic metres of earth would go into the Tsimlyansk dam than had gone into this tiny project.

"You're not listening to me," Lena said irritably. "You're probably busy counting those cubic metres of yours. Couldn't you think of something else for one hour a week at least? "

Ivan Antonovich was always struck by her ability to read his thoughts and sense the slightest change in his mood, but he rarely admitted that she had done so. This time, for instance, he was so taken aback that he stopped dead in his tracks, but, after adjusting his glasses, smiled so artfully that she was deceived. He hastened to say that he too had given much thought to the matter, that certainly an only child was bound to grow up spoiled, but that this was not the time to increase the family; in a couple of years when the Tsimlyansk dam was ready, things would be easier....

After the Tsimlyansk dam came the Kuibyshev dam, and after that the Bratsk, and after that ... after that her health gradually gave way, she was in and out of hospital, they both grew older.

Her love of life, however, was insatiable. Once, soon after coming out of hospital, she said to him.

"Tomorrow's Sunday, Vanya. Katya isn't working, let's leave Misha with her and go to a restaurant for dinner, just the two of us. I'll put on my best dress and we'll go to the National, or even better, to the restaurant at Khimki river-port. While I take a stroll in the park you'll take a table and order the dinner, and in ten minutes or so I'll come in and look round for you as if we had a date and we'll sit facing each other and drink Caberne or something else and talk and laugh and people will look our way and envy us. They'll say, 'What a young mistress that old man has!' Don't you think it's a grand idea? "

"Oh, no doubt about it," he observed somewhat baffled by the extravagance of her impulse, "the only hitch is that on Monday I've got a big conference about the Samara dam and I've got to get my report ready on Sunday. We'll have to put it off."

So they stayed home that Sunday too. Ivan Antonovich got up later than usual and took his time reading the paper, after which he sat down to write his report. Lena busied herself at the kitchen stove. Misha played ball in the yard. At half past two they gathered for dinner at the little table in the kitchen. Dinner without wine, without laughter, without conversation, except for a few remarks about business (his business, of course) and household needs. Lena, with a flowered apron over her house-dress, ladled out the soup and her eyes held not a trace of the roguishness or even of the shine that had come into them the previous day, when she had made up that nonsense about having dinner in a restaurant.

Little by little she completely gave in; she no longer spoke to him about children or restaurants or her original profession aimed at making pretty objects.

She succumbed to humdrum duties and ill-health.

Meanwhile life rushed ahead. Rushed ahead like a car coasting downhill with nothing to stop it.

24

Downhill, downhill! With old age at the bottom, thought Ivan Antonovich. He was glad that his cigarette had gone out; the relighting of it took his mind off his bitter reflections. When the cigarette was going again he picked up the diary. He knew he could not go to sleep until he had satisfied himself about Lena's relations with that old actor Mtsensky.

He found the spot where he had broken off (their visit to the park) and went on. It being very late, he decided not to read everything; he would only read what was of importance to him, and this, he supposed, would be found in big entries covering two or three pages. And so he chose them, and in them most easily recognised Lena's typical manner of expressing herself—her anger,

her humour. Most important of all was that in them he discovered her true feeling for V. V.

He leafed through the book impatiently; surely there must have been some dramatic and decisive scene between them.

In his impatient search for a two- or three-page record of such a scene he almost missed the brief entry which told him exactly what he wanted to know.

"30 May. Today V. V. went to the country to see N. K. I saw him to the station. He did not take my arm as he usually did. For a long time we walked along in silence, as if he was trying to collect his thoughts and decide how to begin. I took the bull by the horns. 'V. V.,' I said, 'what is upsetting you so that you've even forgotten to take my arm?' He did not take it even then, but at least he began to speak—somewhat at a loss and without looking at me. 'I love you, Lena, but if you only knew how uncomfortable I feel when I'm with you! What have I done to deserve such adoration? You don't know me, you don't know what I'm really like at all—just as I don't know what you're really like.'

"I stopped and looked at him, but he went on walking and talking. I followed him like a whipped puppy.

"'Tell me,' he went on, 'what is it that draws you to me so? Why do you kiss me so tenderly? Is it a childish infatuation or a serious relationship that can have only one consummation (and he named the consummation). I am always keenly aware of the big difference in our ages. If you think I'm a lady-killer and a rascal, ready to go all lengths to possess you, you are mistaken. But I am a human being. And the moment may come when I lose control over myself. For that reason I warn you to keep away from me, dear foolish child. We must not see each other any more.'

"2 June. I cried for two days, fool that I am! Almost failed my last state exam. Almost, but not quite, thank the Lord!

"5 June. I'm at N. K.'s *dacha*, taking a little rest. How I loathe this 'cultivated' countryside. Houses and people wherever you look. Men in flannels, women in bright summer dresses. Lawns and woods littered with bits of paper, egg-shells, rusty tins. The Klyazma is a poor sort of river, but I bathed in it and then lay sunning myself on the beach and thinking.

"I hate him!

"I hate him for disappointing my hopes. For allowing me to think so well of him. For worming his way into my heart and building himself a cozy corner there that I shall never be able to get rid of.

"I hate him because for so long a time I was frank and open-hearted with him and held out my hand to him and he kept hiding his own hand behind his back and turning away from me. I hate him because it took me so long to see how petty and commonplace he is, because he was able to deceive me, to make me believe in a non-existent person.

"How I should enjoy unmasking him in front of everybody! How low of him to go on living with a wife he doesn't love for the sake of 'respectability'! A cheap and petty man! Thank God I saw him in the true light before it was too late! But there was a time when—one more step, and I would have lost my silly head completely."

25

Ivan Antonovich drew a deep sigh of relief, put down the diary and stretched himself till his joints cracked.

And so there was no "consummation". The realisation calmed him, and at the same time, despite his relief and happiness in knowing that it was he, Ivan Antonovich, to whom she had given her real love, he said to himself: A woman's love! Here today and gone tomorrow!

How very like Lena all this was—her love affair and all her other entries. She had always been volatile—now gay, now sad, now rude, now tender. He could see her sitting in the armchair of an evening darning Misha's socks while he, her husband, lay on the couch reading the paper; one moment she would be humming a jolly tune to herself and the next would drop her hands, stare into space, and say with a sigh, "I was born to be unhappy! " Once when she looked particularly miserable he put down his paper and looked over his glasses at her inquiringly and she, as if in answer to his unspoken question, said, "Mother once let it slip. When she found herself pregnant the third time she and father decided

that two children were enough. They made arrangements with a doctor, but when they were about to set out for the appointment it began to rain so hard that father urged her to put it off till the following day. The next morning they decided to have the third child: perhaps it would be a son. But it wasn't, as you see; it was another daughter. A great disappointment. Perhaps that's why father took to drink. He wanted a son dreadfully."

Now gay, now sad.

Now rude, now tender.

Yes, rude.

"Oh, send the old bastard to hell! " she might say on hearing the story of Ivan Antonovich's latest conflict with Mezentsev. These conflicts were always about the same thing: Lev Arkadievich's predilection for inundating land; if he had been given his way he would have flooded the whole country. Whenever a new power plant was designed by their Institute, Ivan Antonovich, as head of one of the biggest departments, had to put his signature to it. Sometimes for the sake of a small plant turning out a mere hundred thousand kilowatts of electricity it was necessary to flood almost a million hectares of land. Ivan Antonovich was secretly incensed but did not put up any strong resistance. Lena despised him for being so faint-hearted and following Mezentsev's lead in everything. With the mildest of objections, Ivan Antonovich would sign all the papers. Lena would be furious, call him a coward, quarrel with him, tell him to send Mezentsev to the devil, even use four-letter words that her husband would not allow himself to utter during survey expedition in a boat or round a campfire in male company, to say nothing of uttering them at home. He would blush and shake his head and say in remonstrance, "Lena, how can you? Misha will hear. What will he think of his mother? "

"Misha's a big boy now," she would reply defiantly. "He's heard worse. He'll only respect me the more for speaking outright; as for you, you're neither fish nor fowl, you're afraid to stand on principle and so Mezentsev takes advantage of you. You'll sign anything he tells you to, right or wrong. And once you've signed you don't give a damn what happens. It's your indifference that gets me."

She was right; he was careful never to cross Mezentsev. True there had been times when, spurred on by her chiding, he had argued with his chief about the height of a dam or the choice of a site, but such times had been rare indeed.

Now rude, now tender to the point of sentimentality. Especially with her son. She always woke him up in the morning and saw him off to school. Even when he was a big boy in the last form. She would go into his room and kneel down beside his bed and murmur, "Misha! Misha darling! Time to get up! " She would lift a corner of the blanket and kiss him on the knee. The boy, like any spoiled child, would resist and pull the blanket over his head to steal another minute or two of precious sleep. His mother would call him a lazy-bones and often the tussel would end in harsh words. But she never held a grudge; few people were as forgiving as she. Fifteen minutes later she would kiss him goodbye as he went out the door.

Ivan Antonovich, on the other hand, was always unshakable, absolutely unshakable. He never lost his temper, never used strong language, never raised his voice. Nor did he ever express his joy or give vent to an access of love for his wife or son. Perhaps it was his unshakability, his level-headedness, his constant striving for the conventional that curtailed his wife's life.

He curtailed her life? Where, he quickly countered, was one to find a more solicitous husband? In these times especially, when most men gave free rein to their selfishness. He always helped her as best he could. He, an engineer of position and authority, did not consider it beneath him to step into a shop on his way home from work and buy something for the household. The briefcase he carried was of genuine leather with two shiny locks; anyone seeing him riding in the Metro with such a briefcase would naturally assume it contained important state documents, whereas it really contained a bottle of milk or half a kilogram of sausage. No, no, this charge could not be put to him; he was not responsible for her death. If he in any way shared in the responsibility, it could only be in that he had been unable to make her life easier by organising its routine more efficiently. But he had had no time to give to that.

Five years earlier, when her urine analyses were bad again, she ought to have gone to hospital for treatments. She felt bad and showed alarming symptoms. The doctor offered to arrange for hospitalisation but she refused. Misha was about to take college entrance exams and Ivan Antonovich was getting ready to leave for another expedition to Siberia; how could they manage without her? No, she would go on a diet and remain home with her two beloved men.

She remained home, but as for the diet—today she observed it, tomorrow she was so busy that she almost forgot to eat altogether.

And so the disease was neglected.

By the time serious measures were taken it was too late.

26

Pale morning light came through the window curtains, a dog barked, the hiss of sprayed water came from a car that was watering the street. How many days have I begun without her? he asked himself, and began to count. Three? No, she died on Thursday and today is Monday. The fourth morning without her. He raised his head off the pillow and corrected himself. The first. The first day without Lena in the house.

It was foolish to go on lying there, he could not possibly go to sleep now.

He got up and sat down by the window with the diary in his hand. Listlessly he turned over the pages. There were only a few left to the end. She left nothing but this book behind her, he said to himself. And her son, of course, and two or three dresses, and all the good she did, especially for me. She had done much good for him. Very much. Perhaps it was owing to all she had done for him that he had become that Ivan Antonovich whom everybody esteemed, including Mezentsev and even the General. She had freed him from irksome everyday things such as standing in queues and washing dishes, so that even at home he was able to give himself to his work. She encouraged his making of friends, she invited them to the house and received them cordially. She took

upon herself all the care of their son. Never once, from the first day of Misha's entering school, did Ivan Antonovich attend a parent-teacher meeting or examine a report-card. This was all done by his mother. And it was his mother who helped him with his arithmetic problems and looked over his compositions before he turned them in.

Perhaps she had been right when once, in desperation, she had come out with: "My kindness will be the death of me! As long as I can remember my relatives have taken advantage of me. When I was a little girl my older sister Katya hit me and bullied me into doing all the housework. During the war I was left to take care of our sick mother—do you realise what that meant?—washing her, lifting her, feeding her. And now here you and Misha are. You've turned me, an artist by profession, into a servant. Meek, uncomplaining. Look how old Misha is and he doesn't think of getting married. Why should he? His mother takes care of him. His mother can attend to all his needs—she cooks well, keeps his room in order, washes, irons.... And not once has it ever occurred to either of you that perhaps I was born for better things."

If she could say such things she must have been unhappy with me, thought Ivan Antonovich. He banished the thought by recalling things she had said in quite another vein: things she had said in rare moments of composure: "You're so kind and gentle, Vanya. But you're like an actor: been wearing make-up all your life." Then, lest his feelings should be hurt, she would embrace him and add with a sigh, "You and I had better die together, Vanya. I hate the thought of dying first and leaving you alone. What would you do? You can't cook or take care of yourself."

She was right, he said to himself. A new day had begun and he had to do something about it. He had to shave and take a bath, but he hesitated to enter the bathroom at so early an hour for fear of waking his son; Misha, too, had had a trying day. First I'll finish the diary. He glanced at a page or two and found nothing of interest. As it drew to a close the entries became briefer, more perfunctory. Evidently she had gone back home to live after taking the state examinations, her solitude was

ended, she had nowhere to write in her secret diary, and so the entries became mere scraps written at odd moments, perhaps in bed, for some of them were so carelessly scribbled in pencil that Ivan Antonovich had difficulty in deciphering them.

"7 June. I must be going out of my mind! Clearly everything is over, and still I seek opportunities of seeing him. The other girls are making preparations to go away to do their work before turning in their graduation theses and here I am at N.K.'s *dacha.* I couldn't bear it any longer. I was sure I'd meet him here. I promised myself I would be polite and aloof, but when I saw him I completely lost my head with joy. N.K.: 'How thin you've got, Lena! ' He: 'It's very becoming to her. She's as graceful as Lermontov's Bella.' N.K.: 'You think so? Well, you're a man, men know better.'

"8 June. I'm in an awful state. I realise I ought to put him out of my mind, forget him entirely, but I haven't the strength to do it. I go cold all over the minute I see him. Yesterday we were having tea on the veranda. I looked up and found him staring at me lovingly. The hand holding my teaspoon went numb, I couldn't raise it to my lips, and just then N.K. had to say, 'Here, Lena, try this,' passing me the cake. V. V. got up and came over to me and stroked my hair as if I was a little girl and said, 'Lena's quite grown up now, she's graduating.'

"I'm so tired! So very tired! I want to rest, to be left alone, to have nobody get on my nerves! The sooner I go to Krasnoye the better!

"11 June. I remember Shaw's saying somewhere that he didn't believe in the force of circumstances, that success depended upon finding the necessary conditions, or, if they were not to be found, creating them.

"12 June. Things I must take with me: sheets, a blanket, pillowcases, towels, a coat, 2 dresses, stockings, soap, tooth-paste, a cup and a spoon.

"Things I must buy: a knap-sack, a kerchief, a comb, toilet-water, house slippers, a brassière, a saucepan, writing-paper and envelopes.

"Food: tea, cereal, 1 kilogram of sugar, tins of meat, black bread.

"Perhaps I ought not to take any food with me. Krasnoye is only a small town but people live there, they must eat something.

"14 June. Everything's ready. I leave this evening. Farewell, beloved V.V.! How grateful I am to you! Despite everything, I'm glad you came into my life. You protected me from the commonplace, from the preposterousness of the daily grind. Thank you for that. Goodbye.

"I'm setting off, and life has nothing better to offer than the prospect of going somewhere! "

True enough. She loved to go places, to change her circumstances, but she had no opportunity to do so. She envied Ivan Antonovich: "You're lucky, you'll have no regrets when you die, you've seen everything. As for me, I've not been anywhere but Gelenjik. I haven't even been to Leningrad, to the Hermitage, since the war. What a life! "

It happened that in the last two or three years he was often commissioned to Irkutsk and Bratsk on the Angara River. Lena was always in a state of dejection when she packed his bag. To her usual regret that she had to remain behind was now added jealousy: "There's that bitch waiting for you out there." He longed to reassure her, but what could he say? Lie that he had never had anybody in Irkutsk? Confess and repent of his wartime transgression and swear that everything was over? Never would he do such a thing, not even if she asked him to, not even if he were roasted on live coals! She did not ask him, but he read her thoughts in her crooked little smile. True to himself, he preferred to be silent. He resolved it was best to let sleeping dogs lie; to let bygones be bygones.

Nevertheless Ivan Antonovich hoped to meet Klavdia. The first evening he was in Irkutsk he set out to find her. The little room in Salt End Street where he had spent such pleasant evenings was now occupied by a one-legged war veteran, who shrugged his shoulders perplexedly when Ivan Antonovich asked for Klavdia Nikolayevna. The veteran had no idea where she could be found.

On his way to the construction site next morning he stopped at an information kiosk and asked for the ad-

dress of Klavdia Nikolayevna Lavrukhina. The girl conscientiously looked up all the Lavrukhinas registered in Irkutsk but Klavdia Nikolayevna was not among them. The idea that she might have left the city or got married was so disturbing that he put off all his urgent business and went to the hospital where she had once worked, only to discover it was not visiting day. The woman on guard at the entrance said, "Who do you want to see, citizen?" She was a fat middle-aged woman wearing, despite the warm May weather, a huge fur cloak and a woollen shawl, smoking a cigarette and gazing hostilely at him from under lowered brows. Ivan Antonovich hesitated at first, but at last told her he was a friend of Lavrukhina's who had come to Irkutsk on business and wanted to know if she still worked in this hospital.

"Lavrukhina! A fat chance you have of finding Lavrukhina! " and she blew a cloud of smoke in his face. "It's been ten years since she bore the name of Lavrukhina. Mironova she is now, and if you want to know where she works, it's in the dental clinic."

She explained to him how to get there, but Ivan Antonovich was so crushed by the news of Klavdia's marriage that he turned away without noting the address and without even thanking the woman.

He did not look up Klavdia on that or the following day. Indeed he was kept running here and there on all sorts of business all week long. Let bygones be bygones, he kept urging himself. She's married again, I hope she's happy. So long as he was busy his urgings were effective, but on the day before he left, when he already had his plane ticket in his pocket, he gave up and telephoned the dental clinic. Klavdia was working. He took a taxi and went there. In the big vestibule was an indicator listing the names of the dentists and the numbers of the offices in which they received. He found the name of Mironova, K. N., receiving in room No. 14. He walked the length of the down-stairs corridor. All the rooms had signs instead of numbers, reading "Head Doctor", "Book-keeper", "Director", "Supplies". He went upstairs and saw No. 14 on the door opposite the stair-landing. Some five patients, men and women, were sitting in the small waiting room. "Are you waiting for the dentist in No. 14? " he asked. One murmured "Yes", others nodded. He sat

down and waited for about ten minutes. Another patient came in and said to him, "What time is your appointment for?" "I have no appointment," he replied and, getting up, walked over to the window.

The door of the office opened. Ivan Antonovich glanced at it out of the corner of his eye. The patient came out. His face was grey and twisted with pain. "Next, please!" It was not Klavdia's voice. The next patient went in and, in good time, came out; so did another. Ivan Antonovich remained standing at the window. Suddenly he heard her steps. He started but kept himself from turning round. She went into the next room without noticing him and came back in a minute or two.

Ivan Antonovich waited for all the patients to finish before he went in. He found her washing her hands and talking to the nurse, who was tidying the office. On seeing this unexpected patient enter Klavdia lifted her shoulders in disapproval, as if to say, I'm not taking any more patients today, but when she recognised him her face lighted up and she said joyfully, "Ivan Antonovich! Sit down, do!"

He sat down in the dental chair and she sat beside him on her working stool. She sent the nurse on an errand and there they were, alone as in the old days. But she did not take his hand as she once had done, she merely studied his face in silence, as if searching for changes in it. He did the same. She had hardly changed at all. At last she asked: "What has brought you here?" He explained that on the banks of the Angara, which his expedition had explored during the war, they were now building a power plant. That was the business he had come on, and being here, had decided to look her up.

She smiled. "As you see, I have not been true to you. I'm married." For some reason she appeared to be embarrassed. He wished to congratulate her politely, but he could not get the words out. "I now have two children besides Olga," she added. "I see," he managed to murmur. "And who is he?" "An armyman—a major. A splendid person." Fearing to hurt his feelings, she hastened to add: "But you're a splendid person too, Ivan Antonovich. Don't think I bear any hard feelings."

He took her hand impulsively and kissed it.

Her fingers seared him now as they had done ten years before.

27

When Ivan Antonovich worked on the design of a power plant he did not carry in his mind's eye a vision of the completed dam, the huge ribbed construction stretching from bank to bank with trains and motocars spinning across it and a promenade along the water's edge where the townspeople came in their leisure to gaze into the distance stretching beyond the far bank and admire the festooned lights of the dam in the evening. Above the dam was a big reservoir and below it were churning rapids where the water emptied after accomplishing its work with the turbines.

Ivan Antonovich was not sentimental; he saw the beauties of the dam in "cubics", as he put it. These cubics ran up into millions: millions of cubic metres of earth excavated, millions of cubic metres of concrete poured into the body of the dam, millions of cubic metres of water in the reservoir, etc. He never, for instance, felt the least desire to attend the official opening of a power plant as many of his colleagues did, for as soon as one project was completed another was begun and all his thoughts were concentrated on this, the latest engineering job.

Lena, on the contrary, longed to travel to one of these power plants and see it with her own eyes. Some eight years earlier Ivan Antonovich had arranged for the whole family to go to the official opening of the Irkutsk dam—he and Lena and Misha. He wanted to dispel Lena's suspicions that he still had a woman in Irkutsk; let her be convinced of his purely practical reason for going there.

It turned out to be a memorable and happy trip for all of them.

They arrived in Irkutsk early in the morning. They were met at the station (Ivan Antonovich had many friends engaged on that construction job) and taken to stay in a rest home in the country not far from town. They were given a fine big room overlooking the Angara River. On the next day they went to Bratsk, and on their return took part in the official ceremonies connected with the opening of the new plant.

Lena, to her husband's surprise, was little impressed by the progress made by the people living in the Baikal region—the new towns that had sprung up, the dams and

locks. She gazed impassively, expressing neither wonder nor admiration, when he showed her the gigantic dam spanning the river, the gargantuan cranes. And she was bored to death by the new city of Angarsk whose straight streets and numerous squares (as in Leningrad) Ivan Antonovich found admirable. "Let's get away from here," she urged.

As soon as ceremonies were over he resolved to take her to rough it on the wild shore of Lake Baikal. The builders of the dam had a motor launch named Typhoon which Ivan Antonovich was given the use of for a week. On it they visited Turk and Barguzin and the Baikal sable reservation. On the way back from Barguzin they stopped at Maximikha, where Ivan Antonovich remembered that his old acquaintance Ilya Tugutov lived. Tugutov was a professional hunter and fisherman who during the war had worked as a mechanic with the hydraulic expedition on the Angara. He and Ivan Antonovich had become very friendly.

When the launch drew up on a sandy spit not far from the mouth of the Maximikha River (from which the village took its name) some fishermen were drawing in their nets. That is, the nets were being drawn in by a horse and the fishermen were standing up to their knees in water letting the net pass through their hands, watching to see that the fish did not escape. While the two mechanics from the motor launch had a bathe in the lake, Ivan Antonovich sauntered over to the fishermen. After watching them a while, he opened conversation. They talked about this and that: what sort of catch it was and where they sold their fish, and at length Ivan Antonovich asked casually if they knew Ilya Tugutov and was he still living in Maximikha:

"Ilya! Here's a man from the Typhoon asking about you," one of the men called out.

At that a smallish man in a white singlet and thigh-high rubber boots separated himself from the group at the net and came over. Ivan Antonovich instantly recognised him (oriental people change little with age) but Tugutov gazed at him inquiringly. It was only when Ivan Antonovich opened wide his arms and cried "Ilya Mikhailich! Don't you recognise me?" that Tugutov rushed at him and for some time they alter-

nately embraced and stared at each other on the sandy beach.

When Tugutov learned that Ivan Antonovich had his wife and son with him, he persuaded him to let the launch go back without them and stay in Maximikha for at least a week.

That was what they did. Lena and Misha took their things out of the tiny cabin of the launch and came ashore. The Typhoon left its moorings, bid goodbye with three short blasts of its whistle and was slowly lost to view behind the grey hump of the Sacred Nose.

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Tugutov gave them a cordial welcome. He invited them to stay in his cottage, which he called a bath-house, but Ivan Antonovich had no desire to cause his friend inconvenience, knowing that his family was crowded enough without any guests. Besides, Lena wanted to feel free to do what she pleased, without any of the obligations involved in being a guest. And so they took an empty cottage next to Tugutov's. It was old, with carved gates and shutters and with out-houses made of century-old fir logs. It looked more like a fort than a dwelling. There was nothing inside but a crumbling stove—not so much as a table or benches, to say nothing of beds.

When he saw the empty gloom of the interior, Ivan Antonovich wondered how they could live there; what would they sit on, eat on, sleep on? But Lena was delighted. "How simply perfect!" she exclaimed, and before they had time to catch their breaths she was telling each of them what to do: she sent Misha for straw and Ivan Antonovich for water. She washed the floor, Misha brought straw from the threshing-floor where piles of it were waiting to be stored away for winter; Tugutov brought three bear-hides to throw over the straw; the visitors had their own sheets and blankets with them, and all declared their beds surpassed anything they had known in civilisation. A table was made out of wooden boxes in which tinned goods had been delivered to the local shop across the way. Other boxes served as chairs. Out in the yard they made a stove to cook on out of ten bricks.

Their life was gay and carefree, if without creature comforts. After breakfast they went to the lake shore Lena washed clothes, or basked in the sun, or caught butterflies for a collection which was to serve as a souvenir of this expedition. Ivan Antonovich and Misha made themselves fishing-poles and went off to catch their dinner.

It was the middle of August. The weather was warm and sunny, the air ringingly clear, as only the air of the Baikal can be. The lake, or, as the natives called it, the sea, glistened and sparkled, its waves breaking the sun up into thousands of suns. To the right was Barguzin, with the snowy peaks of the Sayans rising above it; to the left, beyond the misty headland of the Sacred Nose, little steamboats were towing logs fastened together in the Baikal way—in "cigars".

Lena could not gaze her fill at the mountains and lake, and every cell of her body drank deeply of the pure cedar-drenched air. When father and son were tired of fishing they lay down beside Lena on the sand and also gazed without speaking at the mirror-like surface of the Baikal.

"You two go back to Moscow without me," said Lena. "I'll stay here alone. A month of this air and all my ailments will be cured. The mere sight of all this beauty cures me—I feel it as I lie here on the sand."

They would go home in the evening, when the Baikal was aflame with sunset. They made soup of the day's catch, then Tugutov came and they all sat down on the boxes and had tea and listened to Tugutov's tales of how he and his sons hunted sable and bear and fished in the Baikal.

One day Tugutov came earlier than usual. "Tomorrow we want to show you our sea," he said. "We'll take you to the fishermen on the Sacred Nose. Go to bed early because I'll wake you before sun-up."

He came as he had promised, at earliest dawn, and they all got into his boat. Tugutov and his younger son started the engine and they set out on a marvellous trip on Barguzin Sound. Before crossing it they stopped in a quiet bay. The bottom was "paved" with enormous rock strata, dozens of metres wide, and so clear was the water that every little fish and pebble could be counted. They built a campfire and had something to eat before leaving

on what promised to be a long journey. Misha went swimming, Lena did too, despite Ivan Antonovich's lengthy persuasions that it was dangerous for one in her state of health to bathe in such cold water. "If you're afraid of wolves, keep out of the woods," retorted Lena, as she jumped in after Misha.

They went swimming every day after that.

In the silence and wild natural beauty of this place Lena became a different woman. Even her appearance changed. She looked twenty years younger. She wanted to discover everything for herself. From her excursions into the woods she would bring back pailfuls of mushrooms and marvel that nobody else was interested in gathering them. The fishermen's cook, a big sturdy young woman, set out to pick bilberries. Lena asked if she might go with her. "Lord, no! " exclaimed the cook. "It's in the bogs they grow, Elena Vassilievna, up to your knees in water! And the mosquitoes! Can't draw breath for the mosquitoes! " "Phooh, mosquitoes! " retorted Lena. "I've been bitten by much bigger animals and lived to tell it. Can't frighten me with mosquitoes! "

She went with her, and Ivan Antonovich went as escort. He pulled on fishermen's boots above his knees and Lena went in sandals on bare feet, but she leapt from tussock to tussock in the bog regardless of thorns and mosquitoes, delighting like a child in the abundance of berries. "Look how many! Just look! Vanya, do you see? " She would lift up a branch whose leaves were already blighted by autumn, to reveal rich clusters of berries, grey-blue like the misty grey-blue of the Sacred Nose seen from a distance. Lena gathered a pailful—more than the cook—and the fishermen ate them as they drank vodka, scooping them out of the pail by the spoonful, and praising Lena, "A fine wife you've got, Ivan Antonovich—not from these parts by any chance? "

Ivan Antonovich was pleased and flattered that Tugutov and the fishermen approved of his wife. She was excellent at roughing it; slept on a hard bench as the fishermen did, ate what they ate, and if they filled her mug with vodka she drank it down without making coy remarks. She cleaned fish along with the fishermen and asked them to take her with them when they went out to inspect their nets early in the morning.

They took her. Again Ivan Antonovich went too: how could he let Lena go alone?

The fishermen's day began early. They were up before the sun up, before the sea-gulls had left their beds on the quiet waters of the sound. Quickly they washed themselves and went to the sunny side of the shed where their working clothes were hung up to dry: boots that reached to their thighs, mittens, leather caps and aprons. In a minute they were in battle attire and making for the beach, where each man took hold of the boat and all together they pushed it over the sand into the water. Lena helped them. Ivan Antonovich waited until all were seated; he was the last to jump in.

The fishermen called this boat the "shuttle". It took them out to a big motor launch rocking between buoys in the middle of the bay. The mechanic scrambled aboard the launch first and started up the engine. Two smaller boats, the "shuttle" and the one that carried the catch, were tied behind the launch, and the little caravan set off down the sound in the direction of the open "sea", where the posts to which the nets were fastened could be seen.

A wall of nets extended the length of the sound. It cut off the course of the fish and directed them into the "bags"; from early spring until late autumn the fishermen extracted the catch from these "bags".

Ivan Antonovich noticed that the fishermen showed excitement as they neared the nets. An old pock-marked fisherman who with difficulty unfastened the cable securing the net to the post, kept glancing into the nearest "bag". The fish seemed to sense they had been caught, for they kept darting from the depths to the surface and back again.

"What a lot of them! " exclaimed Lena.

"There ain't never a lot these times," said the old fisherman. "Lucky if there's three hundredweight. Time was when it took two hours to empty every bag; like as not we can empty them all in two hours now."

True enough, there were not many of the precious Baikal fish called *omul* in the net. The fishermen quickly caught them in hand-nets and tossed them into the catch boat and went on to the next bag. On the way the old fisherman said, "Fewer and fewer fish in the Baikal with

every year. I remember when we came back from the war we took in as many as fifteen hundredweight a morning. Once at Makarov Cape we hauled in eighteen. Count for yourself what they were worth: a hundred and eighty gold rubles! Nowadays the plan for the whole season is less. In one place they've built a paper mill, in another a power plant. The rivers have been dammed up, their mouths gone boggy. What's more, the winds break up the log floats and the logs go wandering off and tearing our nets."

Ivan Antonovich did not enjoy hearing such things. He could not bear to think his dams could be looked upon as anything but a blessing. His fundamental belief was that his labours brought only joy and light to mankind.

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The fishermen made a little barrel and packed it with selected smoked *omul* as a present for their Moscow guests. They returned to Maximikha in Tugutov's boat again.

On the eve of their leaving Tugutov invited them to his cottage for a farewell supper. It was midnight before they returned to their own quarters. Misha went straight to bed but Ivan Antonovich and Lena sat out on the porch for a while. They did not talk, Ivan Antonovich smoked; Lena, her head in her hands, sat gazing at the Baikal.

Fireflies flickered among the bushes, grasshoppers sang in the grass, from time to time a car would come down the sleeping village street, drowning out the grasshoppers' music and casting its headlights upon the fences, the black shingled roofs, the windows with closed shutters.

The Baikal gleamed softly in the moonlight. In the distance twinkled the lights of fishing villages. So complete was the stillness that the neighbour's cow could be heard chewing her cud in the barn.

"When you retire—Misha will have married by then—we'll leave Moscow and settle somewhere in the wilds," mused Lena. "In the taiga, perhaps. We'll begin life all over again."

"The place has got to be on a river," he put in.

"Very well, on a river," she conceded. "We'll settle on the bank of a river and farm and read poetry." After a little she drew a deep sigh and said, "All foolishness. Empty dreams. What a bitchy thing life is! You want to go in one direction and life keeps pulling you in another."

Once more the silence, the flicker of fireflies, the faint splash of waves.

"What is there of yours here?" she asked suddenly.

"Where?" he asked, not understanding her question.

"I mean, what part have you taken in what has been built and is being built here?"

"Ah," said Ivan Antonovich, glad that she had switched the subject to his beloved work. "A big part, a very big part. It was me who decided what dams were to be built and on what spots—not me alone, of course, but our Institute and my department in the Institute. I defended the choice against those who proposed other spots. Now you have seen for yourself what an enormous industrial centre has grown up on the basis of cheap electrical energy."

"How many metres has the water level of the Baikal risen as a result?"

"About two."

"Did you know that the shores of the lake and the mouths of the rivers would be converted into bogs by your dams?"

"Well, you see," began Ivan Antonovich slowly, weighing every word, "hydraulic engineering is a comparatively young science, it hasn't yet found the answers to a lot of questions." And he launched on one of his characteristically long and tiresome expositions, this time to show that the effects of inundating large territories have been little studied.

For a long time after he finished she made no remark. Then, with a sigh and smiling wryly into the darkness, she murmured:

"And I thought I was your only victim."

Victim.... She my victim ... he kept repeating to himself as he recalled their conversation. Suddenly his heart began to beat furiously, the blood rushed to his head,

there was a roaring in his ears. He threw the diary on the table and clutched his heart. For a minute or two he sat quietly with closed eyes, his head resting on the back of the chair. Gradually the beating of his heart subsided but he still heard the roaring in his ears. Afraid to make any sudden motion, he cautiously got up, reached for the bed-table, pulled out a drawer and felt for the little metal cylinder containing validol tablets. He unscrewed the cap, tapped a tablet into his palm and put it under his tongue. When the soothing fumes of menthol were diffused throughout his body, or so it seemed to him, he went back to the chair and settled himself as comfortably as possible. Try as he might, he could not tear his eyes off Lena's diary.

Across the last page was scrawled in indelible ink:

"The end! He passed me by like driven rain."

No date, no indication of where she had read that line.

It refers to me, thought Ivan Antonovich. Yes, it surely referred to him. He had done much for the advance of his profession and for the people of his country. The power plants he had designed had brought light into people's lives, had given his country iron, steel and motive power for driving its trains. But his absorption in his beloved profession led him to forget the one who was dearest of all to him: Lena. He and she had lived together for over thirty years; had supped at one table, slept in one bed, talked together and thought their thoughts. But that inner something that was her essence remained hidden from him. Undiscovered, uncomprehended, unread. Like that diary which for so many years no eye but hers had seen. She had gone out of life as uncomprehended by Ivan Antonovich as by V.V. All his life he, engineer Ivan Antonovich Teplov, chief of one of the most important departments in one of the biggest designing institutes in the country, had dealt with big figures: billions of cubic metres of water, millions of tons of concrete, hundreds of thousands of hectares of inundated land. His success had won him respect, promotion, awards. Yet now, towards the end of life, he suddenly realised that, in the midst of all these gigantic figures and calculations he had allowed the life of her whom he loved to slip like water through his fingers.

And he was appalled.

Why, Lena? Why? Why wasn't it me who had to die?

He was as piteously helpless as an infant. Suddenly all the emotions he had suppressed in the last few days, all the grief of his loss, all his longing for his wife welled up to the surface and Ivan Antonovich, unable to hold himself in check any longer, burst into tears.

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Misha entered the room without turning on the light. His son, it seems, had also been unable to sleep. He was in the room before Ivan Antonovich had time to pull himself together.

"Come, dad, what's the good of it? Don't, please don't." Misha drew a chair up to his father's and sat down beside him as he had so often sat beside his mother when an arithmetic problem did not work out. "This won't bring her back. At least take care of yourself."

"I know," said Ivan Antonovich, wiping his eyes on his pajama sleeve. "Sorry. I lost control."

"There's no reason to be so upset," said Misha. "It can't be helped. Life is like that."

Lena had given herself heart and soul to Misha's upbringing, and yet he had turned out to be his father's son: practical-minded, well-read, decently restrained in his feelings.

"I know," replied Ivan Antonovich mechanically. "I'm all right, Misha. I'll shave and get dressed now and go to the office. I want to drop in and see Aunt Katya before work. Perhaps Vyacheslav and Masha haven't left town yet. Masha said Vyacheslav had made a public monument with sculptor Prokudin to one of their eminent Voronezh citizens. I want to ask Vyacheslav if he couldn't get Prokudin to design mother's tombstone. This is how I see it: a simple column with her bust in white marble on top—copied from that photograph," and he pointed to the picture of Lena when she was eighteen, with plaits hanging down her back. He had not

known her as a girl of eighteen and when her sisters had wanted to have that particular photograph enlarged, a foolish jealousy had made him refuse. Now he had changed his mind. "I want to preserve her in our memories as she was then, young and pretty."

"Thank you, dad," said Misha. "Here, give me your hand." He drew his father to his feet and embraced him and for a while they stood silently together, the lean grey-haired father and the sturdy son nearly a head taller. "But white marble is very expensive, dad."

"What do I care?" replied Ivan Antonovich. "I've got the money. I was saving up for a country house and now it doesn't matter." He threw out his arms as if pushing off his son and shuffled off in his bedroom slippers.

Misha stopped him.

"Dad," he said nervously, "Rosa and I talked things over and decided she ought to come here to live. At least there'll be a woman in the house even if it isn't mother. You and I will find it easier."

It was as if somebody had delivered Ivan Antonovich a blow on the back of his head. He dropped his head and said softly,

"If that's what you've decided...."

"You sound as if you were displeased."

"Oh, no." Ivan Antonovich raised his head and tried to smile as he repeated, "Oh, no. I'm very glad. Rosa ... of course ..." and he seemed to hear Lena saying again, "I'll be a bad mother-in-law. I dote on Misha and will be jealous of his wife. Any wife, even if she's a very angel. I just won't be able to take it."

"I love her, dad."

"Glad to hear it," said Ivan Antonovich drawing a sigh and saying to himself: Yes, Misha's my son. When he and Lena had joined their lives he had not told anyone either, had merely written his mother briefly, "Come and see me, mother; I seem to have got married."

"Well, then?..." asked Misha, expectantly.

"If that's what you've decided you have my blessing," said Ivan Antonovich. "Who am I to interfere? It's you two who have your lives to live."

VALENTIN RASPUTIN

(b. 1937)

Valentin Rasputin comes from the Siberian village of Ust-Uda in the Irkutsk region. Here he spent his childhood in the difficult war and post-war years. In 1959 he graduated from the historical and philological faculty of Irkutsk University. His first book of stories *I've Forgotten to Ask Lyoshka* was published in 1961. Each of Rasputin's subsequent stories—*Money for Maria, The Last Term* and *Live and Remember*—has been tremendously popular and given rise to lively discussions in the press. The young Siberian writer has shown himself to be an astute observer of daily life with an excellent knowledge of the life of his part of the country and its people.

Rasputin likes putting his heroes to the test in critical moments of life. He is drawn to people who are capable of enduring great spiritual and moral stress. "His heroes are often faced by a crucial choice and only a developed and experienced conscience can save them in a difficult moment from making the wrong step which will lead to tragedy and the collapse of the personality," as one critic wrote about the typical conflict to be found in Rasputin's novellas.

FRENCH LESSON

To Anastasia Prokopyevna Kopylova

> It is a strange thing: why is it that, just as with our parents, we always feel guilty towards our teachers? And not at all because of things in school, no, because of what becomes of us afterwards.

In forty-eight I started going into the fifth form—or to be more exact, I travelled to it, because our village had only an elementary school; so to continue after the fourth I had to go fifty kilometres, to the small town which was the district centre. My mother went there a week beforehand, arranged lodgings for me with someone she knew, and on the last day of August Uncle Vanya, who drove the only truck the kolkhoz possessed, set me down on Podkamennaya Street where I was to live, helped me carry in my bundle and bedding, gave me an

encouraging slap on the back and drove away. I was eleven years old, and I was on my own.

Those were still hungry years, and mother had three of us to feed—I was the eldest. In the spring when things were especially difficult I swallowed and made my sister swallow the eyes of potatoes and grains of rye and oats, hoping they would grow inside us and we wouldn't be thinking about food all the time. All the summer we watered our seeds from the Angara, but for some reason there was no crop, or such a small one that we never felt it. Incidentally, I think our experiment wasn't completely useless and might come in handy for people some day; but we had had no experience and must have done something wrong.

It is difficult to say just how mother made up her mind to send me to town. We had no father, life was a struggle, and I suppose she decided that whatever she did things couldn't be worse than they were. I had done well in the village school. I liked studying and had won quite a name for learning. I wrote and read letters for the old folk, I read all the books in our very modest library and in the evening told the other children tales from them, adding a good bit of my own. But my great prestige came from checking the winning numbers of state lottery-loan certificates. People had collected a great many during the war, the lists of winners were frequent, and when they arrived everyone brought their certificates to me. They said I had a lucky eye. And as a matter of fact, winning numbers did turn up; usually the winnings were small, but in those lean years collective farmers were glad of even a few coins, and here I would be, announcing some unexpected sum. Some of the joy spilled over to me; I was singled out among the other boys, and even treated to some extra food. One day Uncle Ilya, as a rule stingy, scooped up a whole bucketful of potatoes for me after winning four hundred rubles; and that spring, a bucket of potatoes was wealth.

It was because I could understand the lists and the numbers on the vouchers that people began to tell mother, "That lad of yours has got a head on him. You ought to have him taught. Learning never comes amiss."

So in spite of all our troubles mother got me ready and made the arrangements, although before that nobody

else had gone to school in town. I was the first. Naturally, I had no clear idea of what lay before me, or the difficulties I would encounter in this new place.

There, too, I did well at school. After all, that was what I had come for, I had no other interests. At that time I always did my best at anything, it was the only way I knew. I would hardly have dared to approach school with a single lesson unprepared, consequently I always got the top mark—five. Except in French.

My trouble with French was the pronunciation. I could easily remember words and grammar, I translated fast, I coped with all the spelling difficulties, but the pronunciation was blocked by all my Angara forbears back through the generations, none of whom had ever pronounced foreign words—even if they suspected their existence. I rattled out my French after the manner of our village tongue-twisters, swallowed half the sounds as superfluous and rapped out the other half in short barking bursts. When the French teacher, Lydia Mikhailovna, listened to me her face twisted painfully and she shut her eyes. She had never heard anything like it. Again and again she explained and showed me how to pronounce nasal sounds and vowel combinations, and asked me to repeat them after her, but I only floundered, wooden-tongued. It was just no use.

My bad time was when I came home from school. There, I was always occupied with something, doing something, the other boys carried me along with them; whether you want it or not you have to run about, join in games, and at lessons keep your mind on them. But once I was alone homesickness descended in a crushing weight; I ached for home, for the village. I had never been away from my family for even a day, and was quite unprepared for living among strangers. It was a hideous feeling, worse than any sickness. There was only one thing I wanted, one thing I dreamed of—to be at home. I got so thin that mother was frightened when she came to visit me at the end of September. While she was there I kept a grip on myself, I never complained or let a tear show, but when she was actually leaving I gave way and chased after the truck, crying noisily. She waved to me from the back of the

truck—stop, don't disgrace yourself and me!—but nothing of it reached me. Then she made up her mind and asked the driver to pull up.

"Get your things," she said briefly when I ran up to her. "You've got your learning, seemingly, so now we'll go home."

I recovered myself and ran back.

It was not only homesickness that made me thin; I never had enough to eat. In the autumn, when Uncle Vanya came with grain for sale to the state at a centre near the town, he brought me food fairly regularly, about once a week. But the trouble was, it was never enough. There was only bread and potatoes, and now and then a jar of curds for which mother had bartered something, because we had no cow of our own. When he brought it it seemed a lot, but in a couple of days there was nothing. I soon found that a good half of my bread mysteriously vanished. I checked up and found that was correct. It had been there, now it was gone. The same thing happened to the potatoes. I never knew who had taken them—my landlady, a noisy busy woman fending alone for three children, one of her two elder girls, or young Fedka; I shrank even from thinking of it, let alone trying to find out. But it was hard—there was mother depriving the little ones of the last they had so as to feed me, and a good part of it I never got. However, I made myself accept this, too. It wouldn't make mother feel any better if she knew the truth.

Being hungry here was quite different from being hungry in the village. There, especially in autumn, you could always find something to grab, pluck, dig up; there were fish in the Angara and birds in the forest. But here, there was only bare *nothing* all round—strange people, strange kitchen gardens, strange soil. The small river was strained through fishing-nets, ten rows of them. One Sunday I sat all day with my rod and caught only three tiny gudgeon, no bigger than teaspoons. You won't get fat from that kind of fishing. I didn't go again, why waste time? In the evenings I hung about the tea-house and the market, noting the prices, swallowing saliva, and finally going back empty-handed. A kettle stood on the stove; I would drink some hot water to warm my belly and go to bed. In the morning—school again. So it went

on until the happy moment when the truck drove up to the gate and Uncle Vanya knocked at the door. Ravenous as I was, and knowing full well that the food wouldn't last long, however sparing I was, I ate till I was full, till I writhed with pains, and then, after a day or two, went hungry again.

* * *

One day—it was still September—Fedka asked me, "Are you game to play 'fires'? "

"What's that? "

"It's for money. If you've got any, come on and we'll play."

"I haven't any."

"Me too. All right, let's go and watch. You'll see, it's grand."

Fedka led me behind the kitchen gardens, then we went past a long ridge thick with nettles, already black and tangled, dangling their bunches of poisonous seeds; we jumped from hummock to hummock across an old tip and went down into a hollow where we saw a cluster of boys on a small, level patch. We went closer while they eyed us. They were all about the same age as myself except for one, a tall strong fellow with a long reddish cowlick on his forehead, who seemed to be the boss there. I remembered that he was in the seventh form at school.

"What have you brought *him* for? " he asked Fedka.

"He's all right, Vadik, he lives with us," Fedka said ingratiatingly.

"Want to play? " Vadik asked me.

"I haven't any money."

"Mind out—if you try to sneak—! "

"I don't sneak! " I said indignantly.

Since nobody took any more notice of me, I moved closer and watched. They weren't all playing, only six or seven; the rest were like me, watching; they all seemed to have a great admiration for Vadik, who was obviously cock of the walk.

The game was easy enough to understand. Each player put in ten kopecks. Then the coins were arranged

in a pile, "tails" upwards, on an area bounded by a thick line a couple of metres from kitty, then at the other end by a sunken boulder which served as a footrest when a player threw a round flat stone. It had to be aimed so as to roll as close as possible to the line but without passing over it. The closest then had the right to break up the kitty. That was done by striking the coins with the same flat stone, trying to tip them so that they turned over "heads" up. The "heads" coin was yours, go on and try another, but the really winning shot was when the thrown stone hit the pile; then, if even one of them fell "heads" up, the whole kitty went into your pocket and the game began afresh.

Vadik was clever. He went last to the boulder when the whole picture was clear and he could see where to throw in order to forge ahead. The money was won by the first, it seldom lasted up to final players. Probably everyone understood Vadik's cleverness but nobody dared say a word. It's true, he played with skill. At the boulder he would bend his knees slightly, eyes narrowed, aim the stone at the mark, rise with unhurried smoothness and the stone slid from his hand and went exactly where he had aimed. With a quick movement he tossed back the cowlick from the forehead, spat casually to one side and with deliberate slowness advanced to the money. If the coins were heaped up he struck a sharp ringing blow, but when they lay separately he gave them a light, careful touch so that the coin did not jump high or turn over a number of times, but rose slightly and settled on its other side. Nobody else could do that. The boys hit wildly and then got out more coins, and those who had none joined the spectators.

If only I had had money, I felt I could have played. In the village we had played knucklebones, and that too needs a sure eye. In addition, I liked to set myself targets to hit. I would collect a handful of stones, find a difficult target and go on throwing until I had gained my objective—ten hits out of ten. I threw from above, round my shoulder and from below, bringing the stone down on my target. So skill I had. But I had no money.

Mother sent me bread because she had no money, otherwise I could have bought it where I was. Where would we get it on the kolkhoz? A couple of times

mother had slipped a five-ruble note into a letter—fifty kopecks by the present coinage—to buy myself milk. It was no great sum, of course, but it would buy me five half-litre jars of milk at the market—a ruble a jar. I was supposed to drink milk because of anemia, I sometimes got dizzy spells for no apparent reason.

The third time I got a five-ruble note, however, I did not spend it on milk, I changed it into small coins and went to the tip. The place had certainly been well chosen—a level patch closed in by mounds, not overlooked anywhere. At home in the village, where grown-ups could see what you did, you got into bad trouble for gambling, with threats of the headmaster and even the militia. But here there was nobody to disturb us. And it was nearby, you could get there in ten minutes.

The first time I lost ninety kopecks, the second time sixty. I hated seeing the money go, but I felt I was getting my hand in, my fingers were becoming accustomed to the stone, I was learning just how much strength to use so as to make it go where I wanted while my eye could predict where it would fall and how far it would roll. In the evenings, when the others had gone, I would go back, take out the stone which Vadik had hidden under the boulder, get my small change out of my pocket and go on throwing until darkness fell. In the end, out of ten throws the stone came right down on the money three or four times.

At last the day came when I could count my winnings.

It was a dry, warm autumn; although it was October one could go about in a shirt; rain fell rarely and seemed almost accidental, blown over by a breeze from some place of bad weather. The sky was summery-blue, but seemed lower, and the sun sank earlier. When it was clear the air seemed to shimmer over the low hills, filled with bitter, intoxicating scents of dry wormwood; distant voices came clearly and birds were gathering in circling flocks for their migration. The grass on our patch, although yellow and limp, was still soft and alive, the boys not playing—mostly those who had lost—fooled about on it.

Now I hurried off there every day after school. The boys changed, some fell out and new ones appeared,

only Vadik never missed a game and indeed, without him it never started. He was followed like a shadow by a squat boy nicknamed Chicken with a big cropped head. I had never noticed Chicken at school, but—to anticipate—in the second term he descended on our form like snow on our heads. It appeared that he had been left for a second year in the fifth form, but on some pretext or other had managed to extend his holiday until January. Chicken too usually won—not so much as Vadik, but he always left better off than he came. One reason probably was that he was hand-in-glove with Vadik who gave him a bit of sly assistance.

Another boy in our form, Tishkin, came sometimes. He was a blinking fidgety boy who liked to shoot his hand up during lessons. Whether he knew the answer or not, up went his hand; then when he was asked, he was silent.

"Why did you put your hand up? "

He blinked. "I remembered it, but when I got up I forgot."

I did not make friends with him. I had not made friends with any of the boys at that time—from tongue-tied shyness, village reserve, but mainly because my dreadful homesickness left me with no desire for it. They showed no desire for my company, either, so I remained alone, not realising that I was lonely or trying to escape from it. I was alone because I was here and not at home, in the village where I had plenty of friends.

Tishkin seemed not to notice me on our playing patch. He lost quickly, vanished and did not return for some time.

I won. I had started winning steadily, every day. I had worked out my play: not to roll the stone over the ground, trying for the first blow. When there were many players this wasn't simple: the closer you came to the line, the greater the danger of rolling over it and being the last. The thing was to cover the kitty when you threw the stone. That was what I did. Of course, it was a risk, but with my skill the risk was worth it. I could lose three or four times running, but with the fifth, when I took the kitty, I regained what I had lost twofold. Then I would lose again and get it back again. I seldom struck the coins with the stone, but here too I had my own

way. Vadik struck to turn the coin to him, I on the contrary struck to push it away; this was unusual, but it meant that the stone supported the coin, prevented it from spinning and, leaving it, made it follow.

Now I had money. But I did not let the game keep me there until evening; I needed a ruble, just one ruble every day. Once I had it I went off, bought a jar of milk at the market (the market-women grumbled at my bent, misshapen coins but poured out the milk), then I had supper and sat down to my lessons. I still hadn't enough to eat, but knowledge that I was drinking milk gave me strength and eased my hunger. And those dizzy spells were much less frequent.

At first Vadik took my success calmly. It meant no loss to him, I doubt very much if anything from his pocket came my way. Sometimes he even praised me: that's the way to throw, learn how to do it, you fumblers. But soon he noticed that I left far too quickly and one day he stopped me.

"Hi, you—grabbed the kitty and making off? Clever boy, aren't you? Come on, play."

"But I have to do my lessons, Vadik," I protested.

"If you want to do lessons don't come here."

Chicken backed him up.

"Where'd you get the idea you can play for money like that? Look out or you'll win something you don't want! Get me?"

After that Vadik never let me have the stone before himself. He threw well, and I often had to dive into my pocket for another coin without touching the stone. But I threw better, and if I got the chance the stone went straight to the money like iron to a magnet. I was surprised at my own skill; I should have had enough sense to hold it back, to play without attracting attention, but I was still too simple and continued to bombard the kitty. How could I know that nobody is ever forgiven for going too far ahead? Let him never hope for mercy or seek a defender, to the others he's an upstart and is hated most of all by the one just behind him. This was knowledge which I learned that autumn the hard way.

I had thrown on the money again and was going to collect it when I saw Vadik had his foot on a coin which had fallen somewhat aside. All the rest

were "tails" up. In such cases it is customary to shout "Warehouse! " before throwing, in order, if there was no "heads", to collect the money into a pile to strike, but as usual, relying on success, I hadn't shouted.

"No warehouse," Vadik announced.

I went up and tried to move his foot from the coin, but he pushed me away, quickly picked it up and showed me "tails". But I had had time to see it lay with "heads" up—otherwise he wouldn't have covered it.

"You turned it over," I said. "It was 'heads', I saw it."

He pushed a fist under my nose.

"And this—you see it? Take a smell! "

I had to give up. It was no use insisting, if a fight started not one of them would take my part, not even Tishkin who was there too. Vadik glared at me, eyes angrily narrowed. I stooped, struck the nearest coin, turned it and moved a second. If not one way, then another, I decided. I'll collect them all the same. Again I held the stone to strike but had no chance to complete the stroke: somebody behind kneed me hard and I fell awkwardly, my face striking the ground. Sniggers. I turned. Chicken stood behind me, grinning. I was taken aback.

"What did you do that for? "

"Who said it was me? You're dreaming! "

"Give me that! " Vadik held out his hand for the stone but I held onto it. Anger had burned out fear, I wasn't afraid of anything. Why did they do that to me? What for? What had I done to them?

"Give it here! " Vadik ordered.

"You did turn the coin! " I yelled at him. "I saw it, I saw you do it! I saw it! "

"Say that again," he said, advancing ominously on me.

"You turned it," I said, more quietly now, knowing well what that would bring.

The first to hit me was Chicken, again from behind. I shot towards Vadik who quickly, accurately, without taking aim, smashed his head into my face. I fell with blood spurting from my nose. I was barely up when Chicken went for me again. I could have broken away and run, but for some reason I never thought of it. I was

tossed between Vadik and Chicken, hardly defending myself, my hand over my nose with the blood pouring from it; and desperately, furiously, stubbornly I kept on shouting, "You turned it! You did! You did! "

They hit me in turn, one and two, one and two, one and two. Some third boy, small and vicious, kicked my legs—afterwards I found they were black and blue. My one thought was not to fall, not to fall whatever happened, even in those moments I felt that would be a disgrace. But in the end they did get me down, and stopped.

"Get out before I kill you! " Vadik bawled. "Get! "

I rose, sobbing, sniffling through a numbed nose and climbed the hill.

"Just try to blab—I'll kill you! " Vadik shouted after me.

I didn't answer. I was a tight knot of humiliation and anger, I could not force out a word. It was only when I was at the top that something burst, and mad with fury, I shouted with all my lungs—loud enough for the whole place to hear, "You did turn it! "

Chicken started up after me but stopped at once—probably Vadik felt they'd done enough to me and called him back. For about five minutes I stood there looking at the patch where play had started again, then went down the other side of the hill into a hollow filled with blackened nettles, collapsed on the harsh dry grass and gave way to loud weeping.

In all the world that day there was no one more miserable than I.

* * *

In the morning I looked at myself in the mirror, appalled. My nose had swollen up like a potato, I had a black eye and below it, on my left cheek, was a blood-filled bruise. How could I go to school looking like that? But go I must, I couldn't miss whatever had happened. Well, nature had given some people noses as big as mine, you would never have guessed it was a nose bút for the place where it stood; but the bruise, and the black eye—there was no explaining those away, anyone

could see it was no wish of mine that they were blazing there.

I slipped into the classroom, covering my eye with my hand, sat down at my desk and dropped my head. Of course, the first lesson had to be French. Lydia Mikhailovna, our form mistress, was particularly alert and it was difficult to hide anything from her. She would come in and say "good morning", but before she told us to sit down she would always look at each one of us, with remarks which, although couched in joking form, were meant to be obeyed. Of course she noticed the indications on my face at once, however I tried to hide them; I saw that by the way the others began to turn and look at me.

"Well," said Lydia Mikhailovna, opening the class-book, "I see we've got a wounded here with us today."

The others laughed and Lydia Mikhailovna raised her eyes to me again. She had a slight cast and appeared to be looking past me, but by that time we had learned to know where she was really looking.

"What's happened to you? " she asked.

"I fell down," I blurted out; I hadn't thought to prepare a plausible explanation.

"Dear me, how unfortunate. Was it yesterday or today? "

"Today. No, I mean yesterday, when it was dark."

"Tee-hee-fell down! " squealed Tishkin, choking with glee. "It was Vadik from the seventh gave it him. They were gambling and he started to argue and got it. I saw it. And now he says he fell down! "

I was thunderstruck at such treachery. Was he just stupid, or was he doing it on purpose? You could be expelled for gambling. I was for it. My eyes darkened and there was a roaring in my ears. I was lost. Tishkin! He'd done me a good turn! It was all out now.

"Tishkin, it was something else I wanted to ask you," Lydia Mikhailovna checked him, showing no surprise, speaking in the same quiet, ordinary voice. "Come up to the board, since you want to talk, and get ready to answer." She waited while Tishkin, confused and apprehensive, came forward and then told me briefly, "You'll stay behind after school."

My worst fear was that Lydia Mikhailovna would take me to the headmaster. This would mean that in

addition to today's talk, I would have to come forward at assembly tomorrow and explain what had induced me to engage in such disgraceful conduct. That was what the headmaster, Vassili Andreyevich, always asked a culprit, whatever he had done—broken a window or smoked in the lavatory: "What induced you to engage in such disgraceful conduct?" He would pace up and down in front of the school, hands behind his back, jerking his shoulders forward in time to his pacing so that it looked as though his tightly buttoned, projecting trench-coat moved independently, slightly contrariwise to the headmaster; he would hurry the unhappy boy with "Answer, answer. We're waiting. Look, the whole school's waiting to hear what you have to say." The boy would try to stutter some excuse, but the headmaster cut him short: "Answer the question, the question. What was it?" "What induced me—" "Exactly. What induced you. Well, we're listening."

As a rule it ended in tears; only then the headmaster was satisfied and we went to our classrooms. It was more difficult with the big boys who didn't want to cry, but couldn't answer Vassili Andreyevich's question. Once the first lesson began ten minutes late; all that time the headmaster had questioned a ninth-former, but getting nothing coherent out of him, took him away to his study.

But what could I say? Better if they expelled me at once. As I thought of that, it flashed through my mind that then I could go home—but took fright as though I'd burned myself: no, I couldn't go home in disgrace. Another thing if I dropped school myself. But then they might say I couldn't be depended on since I hadn't been able to do what I'd wanted, and everyone would look askance at me. No, not that, either. I could stick it out here, I'd get used to it, but to go home like that—NO!

After school I waited for Lydia Mikhailovna in the corridor, half dead with fear. She came out of the teachers' room and nodded to me to follow her into the classroom. As usual she sat down at the table; I wanted to go to the back row, farther away, but she indicated the front desk, right in front of her.

"Is it true that you've been gambling?" she began at once.

She spoke too loudly, I had a feeling that here in school such things should be only whispered and my fear grew. But it was no use trying to get out of it. Tishkin had given me away completely.

"It's true," I mumbled.

"Well—did you win or lose? "

I didn't know which was the best thing to say, so I said nothing.

"Come on, tell me how it was. Lost, I suppose? "

"N-no, I w-won."

"That's one good thing, anyway. So you've been winning. What do you do with the money? "

It had taken me a long time to get used to Lydia Mikhailovna's voice, it had always confused me. In our village people brought up their voices up from somewhere deep inside them so that they boomed, but Lydia Mikhailovna's voice was small and light, one had to listen; it wasn't because it was weak, she could speak powerfully if she wanted, it seemed as though she were holding back her breath, a kind of unnecessary economy. I was ready to blame French; naturally, while she was studying, getting used to a strange language, her voice had been constrained and had got weak, like a bird in a cage, you had to wait for it to recover its volume and strength. Now, too, Lydia Mikhailovna questioned me as though she were busy with something else, something more important; but there was no evading her questions.

"Well? What do you do with the money you win? Buy sweets? Or books? Or are you saving up for something? You must have a lot by now."

"No, not much. I only win a ruble."

"And then you don't play any more? "

"No."

"And the ruble? Why just a ruble? What do you do with it? "

"I buy milk."

"Milk? "

She sat there before me, neat, wise, good to look at in her way of dressing and in her young womanliness which I vaguely felt; a faint perfume came to me. I thought it was her breath. And then, too, it wasn't just arithmetic she taught, or history, but that mysterious French language, and that, too, held something special,

something magical, not attainable by ordinary people—well, like me, for instance. I dared not raise my eyes to her, but I dared not deceive her. And after all, why should I tell lies?

She sat looking at me in silence, and I felt through all my skin that under the gaze of her eyes with that slight cast, all my awkwardness seemed to become enormous and swollen with an ill power. Of course there was something for her to look at: a thin awkward boy with a battered face, fidgeting in front of her, motherless, unkempt, lonely, in an old washed-out jacket with sagging shoulders, fitting over the chest but with sleeves far too short; in limp pale-greenish pants made over from father's riding breeches tucked into the rough slippers called *chiriki* and bearing traces of yesterday's fight. I had already noticed Lydia Mikhailovna's interested glance at my *chiriki*, nobody else in our form wore them. It was only the following autumn that I refused point blank to wear them to school any longer, that mother sold the sewing machine, our only treasure, and bought me rough top-boots.

"All the same, you shouldn't play for money," said Lydia Mikhailovna thoughtfully. "You can manage without somehow. Can't you?"

Hardly daring to believe that I was to be spared, I promised easily, "Yes—I can."

I was sincere, but what can you do if sincerity cannot be tied on with rope!

To be truthful, things were very bad for me those days. The autumn was a dry one, the kolkhoz had completed its grain deliveries early, and Uncle Vanya didn't come any more. I knew that mother would be worried sick about me, but that didn't make things any easier. The sack of potatoes Uncle Vanya had brought on his last trip melted away as quickly as though it were being fed to cattle at the very least. It was a good thing I had had the idea of hiding some of them in an abandoned shed out in the yard; it was this secret store that kept me alive. After school I would sneak out like a thief, slip into the shed, push some potatoes into my pockets, and run off to the hills to make a fire in some conveniently hidden place. I was constantly hungry, even in my sleep I could feel waves of dry cramps in my stomach.

Hoping to find other gamblers I started investigating the neighbouring streets, wandering about the waste lands, watching the boys who went to the hills. But it was all no good, the season was over, ended by the cold October winds. It was only on our former space that the boys still gathered. I hung about nearby, saw the stone gleaming in the sunshine, saw Vadik brandishing his arms as he ordered the others about and the familiar figures bending over the kitty.

In the end I couldn't hold out, and went down. I knew this was humiliation, but it was no less humiliation to reconcile myself once and for all to being beaten up and driven away. I wanted to see how Vadik and Chicken would react to my appearance, and how I myself would behave. But the main driving force was my hunger. I needed a ruble—not for milk, but for bread. And I knew no other way to earn it.

As I approached the play stopped and all turned to stare at me. Chicken was wearing a cap with earflaps turned up, cocked at a bold, careless angle like everything he wore, and a checked short-sleeved shirt hanging outside his trousers; Vadik was smart in a fine thick tunic with zipper fastening. Jackets and coats were piled up nearby with a small boy, about five or six, sitting on them.

The first to speak was Chicken.

"What have you come for? Want some more of the same?"

"I've come to play," I said as calmly as I could, looking at Vadik.

"And who said we want you, you—" Chicken added a few choice epithets.

"Nobody."

"Hi, Vadik, shall we give it him now or wait a bit?"

"Let him alone, Chicken." Vadik looked at me, narrow-eyed. "Can't you see, here's a fellow come to play. Maybe he wants to win ten rubles off each of us."

"You haven't got ten," I said just to show I wasn't afraid.

"We've got more'n you think. Put yours down and shut up, before Chicken gets real angry. He's a hot-headed sort of fellow."

"What if I give him one, Vadik?"

"No, let him play." Vadik winked at the others. "He plays real well, wipes his feet on all of us."

I had learned my lesson, however, and knew just how much Vadik's benevolence was worth. He was probably tired of dull, uninteresting play, and had decided to let me in so as to make it more exciting. Let me but touch his vanity, however, and I'd be for it again. He'd soon find some pretext, and there was Chicken more than ready.

I decided to play cautiously and not make any big killing, I threw the stone fearing to hit the money by accident, then quietly struck the separate coins, with a glance to make sure Chicken wasn't behind me. Those first days I did not venture to think of a ruble, twenty or thirty kopecks for a piece of bread—that was better than nothing, that was what I wanted.

But, of course, the end was sure. On the fourth day, when I had won a ruble and wanted to go, I was beaten up again. True, this time the beating was less, but the traces showed in a badly swollen lip. I had to bite it all the time in school. But Lydia Mikhailovna saw it, whatever I did. She called me up to the blackboard and made me read a French text. Even with ten good lips I couldn't have got the pronunciation right, with one swollen there wasn't a chance.

"Stop, oh stop! " cried Lydia Mikhailovna, raising a hand as though to ward something off. "What's this meant to be? No, I'll have to give you extra tuition. There's no other way."

* * *

That was the start of rackingly uncomfortable days. Right from morning I was apprehensively awaiting the time when I should have to remain alone with Lydia Mikhailovna and break my tongue in the effort to repeat after her words invented to torment one. Now, why on earth must three vowels be jammed together into a thick long "o", except deliberately for torment? —as in the word *beaucoup* which you could choke on? Why did you have to make groaning sounds through your nose when it had always served a quite different purpose?

Common sense ought to set *some* limit. I sweated, turned crimson and choked, while Lydia Mikhailovna without pity or let-up forced me to twist my poor tongue. And why only me? There were plenty of boys in the school who spoke French just as badly as I did, but they were out playing, doing whatever they wanted, while I, like a scapegoat, was punished for all of them.

But there was worse to come. Lydia Mikhailovna suddenly decided that there was too little time before the second shift at school, and told me to come to her home in the evening. She lived in one of the teachers' houses beside the school. She had half a house and the other part was the headmaster's.

I went there as to a torture-chamber. I was naturally shy and awkward, confused by trifles, and in that clean, neat apartment I was afraid to breathe. I had to be told to take my things off, to come in, to sit down, I had to be moved about like a piece of furniture, and it cost real effort to squeeze a word out of me. This hardly helped my French. But—strange!—we seemed to work for a shorter time here than at school, where the second shift was supposed to have come too quickly. Not only that, Lydia Mikhailovna, busy with her own domestic affairs, asked me questions or talked about herself. I suspect that she invented for my benefit the story that she had deliberately chosen the French faculty because she had been unable to come to terms with the language at school and had wanted to prove to herself that she could manage it just as well as anyone else.

Huddled in a corner, I listened and longed for the moment when she would let me go. There were a great many books in the room, and on a stool by the window stood a big handsome radiogram, a rare thing at the time and to me a marvel. Lydia Mikhailovna put on records, and again a man's well-modulated voice taught French. There was no getting away from it. Lydia Mikhailovna moved about the room in her plain house-frock and soft felt slippers, making me flinch every time she approached. I simply couldn't believe that I was sitting in her room, everything was too strange and startling for me, even the air which seemed impregnated with the faint, unfamiliar scent of a life different from anything I knew.

I had the feeling of peering into that life from outside, and in awkward shame shrank into my scanty jacket.

Lydia Mikhailovna must have been about twenty-five at that time; I well remember her face, regular-featured and consequently not very animated, her eyes slightly narrowed to hide that cast, her tight smile that rarely widened to the full and her short, quite black hair. There was nothing in her face of the hardness which, I later noticed, becomes with the years almost a professional badge of teachers, even those naturally gentle and kind, but there was a kind of cautious, amused dubiousness concerning herself, as though wondering: how did I land here and what am I supposed to be doing? I believe now that she had been married—there was assurance and experience in her voice, in her walk—supple, free and confident, in her whole style and manner. Besides, I have always thought that girls who study French or Spanish become women earlier than those who study, say, Russian or German.

I'm ashamed now to remember how alarmed and embarrassed I was when Lydia Mikhailovna, our lesson finished, called me to supper. Ravenous as I had been just before, that invitation drove all appetite out of me. No, no! To sit at the same table with Lydia Mikhailovna! Better to learn the whole French language by heart tomorrow, so as never to come here again! Even a piece of bread would have stuck in my throat. I don't believe I'd ever guessed before that Lydia Mikhailovna ate ordinary food like all of us and not some kind of heavenly manna—she seemed far too unique, too unlike everybody else.

I jumped up, mumbled something about having eaten, not wanting anything, while I tried to edge along the wall towards the door. Lydia Mikhailovna looked at me, surprised and hurt, but nothing could stop me. I turned and ran. This happened several times until Lydia Mikhailovna gave up and stopped inviting me to table. I breathed more freely.

Then one day I was told there was a parcel down in the cloakroom for me, a man had brought it. Uncle Vanya, of course, who else could it be! Probably the house was locked up, and Uncle Vanya couldn't wait till school was over, so he had left it there. I could hardly

hold out until the end of lessons and then I rushed down. Our school cleaner pointed to a white plywood box, the kind used for parcel post, standing in a corner. That surprised me—why the box? Mother usually sent food in an ordinary sack. Perhaps it wasn't for me at all? No, there was my name and form written on top. Uncle Vanya must have written it here, so there wouldn't be any mix-up. Where had mother got the idea of nailing things up in a box? Look how townified she was getting!

I couldn't wait to get home without finding out what was inside. Not potatoes, of course. For bread it was too small, and inconvenient, too. Besides, she had sent bread only a little while before and I still had some. What was it, then? I crawled under the stairs where I remembered an axe was kept, found it, and opened up the box. It was dark under the stairs so I crawled out again and, peering round, set the box up on the nearest window-sill.

I looked inside and stared, stupefied. There on top, covered by a neat sheet of paper, lay macaroni. That was something! The long yellowish tubes lying closely, evenly, were rare wealth to my dazzled eyes—better than anything I could imagine. Now it was clear why mother had found a box—so that the macaroni wouldn't be broken and crushed, but come to me in all its perfection. I carefully lifted a tube, looked at it, blew through it and unable to hold back, began crunching it greedily. Then I took a second and a third, wondering where I could hide the box to keep the macaroni safe from the far too greedy mice in my landlady's larder. It wasn't for them mother had used her last money to buy it. No, I wasn't going to lose that macaroni. This wasn't potatoes.

I started. Macaroni. Yes, where *had* she got it? There had never been any in the village, you couldn't buy it for any money. What did it all mean, then? Hastily, in hope and despair, I pushed the macaroni to one side and beneath it found several big pieces of loaf sugar and two slabs of hematogen. That settled it. The parcel wasn't sent by mother. But who, then? I looked at the top again—yes, my form, my name. Queer, very queer.

I pushed the nails fastening the lid back into their holes and, leaving the box on the window-sill, went up the stairs and knocked at the door of the teachers' room.

But Lydia Mikhailovna had gone. That didn't matter, I knew where she lived all right. So that was it: if you won't sit down to table, you get the food sent home. Nothing doing. It couldn't be anyone else. It wasn't mother, she'd have put a note in, told me where all this wealth had come from, and how.

When I edged in sideways Lydia Mikhailovna put on a look of bewilderment as I set the box down in front of her.

"What's that? What have you brought? What for?" she said in a tone of surprise.

"It was you," I said in a shaking, breaking voice.

"What was me? What are you talking about?"

"You sent this to the school. I know it was you."

Lydia Mikhailovna blushed and looked embarrassed. That was probably the one and only time I was not afraid to look her straight in the eye. I didn't care if she was a teacher or my own aunt. I was asking the questions now, not she, and asking them not in French but in Russian, with none of those articles. And let her answer.

"Why do you think I sent it?"

"Because we never have macaroni at home. Or hematogen, either."

"What! Never?" Her surprise was so genuine that she gave herself away completely.

"No, we never have it. You ought to have known."

Lydia Mikhailovna burst out laughing and tried to hug me, but I evaded her.

"Yes, it's right, I ought to have found out. How could I neglect it?" She thought for a moment. "But it was difficult to guess—honestly! I've always lived in towns. So you never have it, you say? What do you have, then?"

"Peas. And winter radish."

"Peas. Winter radish. In the Kuban we have apples. Oh, how many there must be now! I wanted to go to the Kuban this year, but somehow I came here instead." Lydia Mikhailovna sighed and glanced quickly at me. "Don't be angry with me. I meant it for the best. Who'd have guessed I could give myself away with macaroni? Never mind, I'll know better. But take the macaroni—"

"No!" I cut her short.

"Why are you like that? I know you don't get enough to eat. And I live alone and I've plenty of money. I can buy anything I want, but when I'm alone—and anyway I don't eat much, I'm afraid of putting on weight."

"I've got all I want to eat."

"Don't argue. I know. I've talked to your landlady. What's bad about it if you take that macaroni and make yourself a good supper? Why can't I help you—just once? I promise not to send any more parcels. But take this one—please. You must have enough to eat if you're going to study. We've got plenty of well-fed dunces here who don't take anything in and probably never will, but you're a boy with brains, it would be all wrong for you to leave school."

Her voice began to have a soporific effect; I was afraid she might over-persuade me, I was angry with myself because I knew she was right, and because I wouldn't let myself accept it. Shaking my head and muttering something, I made a dash for the door.

* * *

Our lessons didn't stop, I continued to come to Lydia Mikhailovna, but now she really got down to business. It was as though she had decided: if it's to be only French, then French let it be. And something really began to come of it, I gradually learned to pronounce French words quite creditably; they no longer fell like heavy stones to my feet but rang and tried to fly.

"Good," Lydia Mikhailovna encouraged me. "You won't get a five this term, but you certainly will next."

We never mentioned the parcel, but I was on the alert—just in case. You never could tell what Lydia Mikhailovna might think up. I knew by myself: if something doesn't come off, you don't give up, you try some other way. I could feel that Lydia Mikhailovna kept looking at me expectantly, and then laughed to herself over my savagely shy independence; it made me angry, but strange as it might be, that anger gave me more confidence. I was no longer that meek, helpless boy afraid to move a step here, I gradually got used to Lydia Mi-

khailovna and to her room. I was still shy and huddled into a corner, hiding my *chiriki* under my chair, but my former tongue-tied constraint had gone, I ventured to ask Lydia Mikhailovna questions and even to argue with her.

She tried once more to make me join her at table but there was nothing doing. I stood firm. I had obstinacy enough for ten.

We might well have stopped the extra lessons, I had already mastered the main difficulty, my tongue had become supple, I could manage the rest at the ordinary lessons. There were plenty of years ahead. What would I do later on if I learned it all from beginning to end now? But I didn't venture to say anything of this to Lydia Mikhailovna, and she evidently didn't consider that we had got through our programme, so I continued grinding away at French. Incidentally, was it really a grind? Somehow or other, I myself hardly knew how, I had begun to acquire a taste for the language and in free moments without any urging hunted through the dictionary and looked at lessons we had not yet reached in the textbook. The grind had become a pleasure. Then, too, I was spurred on by pride: I hadn't been able to do it, but now I would, and as well as the best. Was I any worse than them? If only I hadn't had to go to Lydia Mikhailovna. I could have done it alone.

One day, about a fortnight after the parcel, Lydia Mikhailovna asked me, "Well, don't you play for money any more? Or do you all get together somewhere to play?"

"How could we play now?" I said, with a look outside the window where the snow already lay.

"What was the game? How did you play?"

"What d'you want to know for?" I was suspicious.

"Just for interest. When I was a child we used to play, too, I was wondering if it was the same game. Tell me, don't be afraid."

"What'ud I be afraid of?"

I told her—saying nothing, of course, about Vadik, Chicken and the small tricks I used in playing.

"No." Lydia Mikhailovna shook her head. "I've never heard of 'fires' before. We used to play 'chika'. Do you know it?"

"No."

"Look here." She jumped up lightly from the table where she was sitting, found some coins in her handbag and moved a chair away from the wall. "Come here, look. I strike a coin against the wall." She struck a light blow and the coin, jingling, descended in a curve to the floor. "Now—" and she gave me a second coin, "you strike. But remember—you've got to make your coin fall as close to mine as you can. To measure, you must reach both with the fingers of one hand—sometimes we called it 'measures'. If you can reach both you've won. Here, try it."

I struck, but my coin fell on its edge and rolled away into a corner.

"Now you begin. But another thing—if my coin touches yours, even with its edge, I win double. That's 'chika', I suppose from 'chiknut', 'to touch'. Understand?"

"Nothing hard there."

"Shall we play?"

I couldn't believe my ears.

"Me—play with you?"

"Why not?"

"But you're a teacher!"

"Well, and so what? You think a teacher isn't human? Sometimes I get sick of being nothing but a teacher all the time, teaching and teaching and no end to it. Always holding myself back, mustn't do this, mustn't do that." Lydia Mikhailovna's eyes narrowed more than usual as she looked thoughtfully, absently out of the window. "Sometimes it's good to forget you're a teacher—or you can turn into a walking 'must' and 'mustn't', until it's boring for real-life people to be anywhere near you. I sometimes think the most important thing for a teacher is not to take oneself too seriously, to remember that it isn't so very much one can teach, after all." She gave herself a little shake and gaiety returned. "When I was a child I was ready for anything, always in scrapes. My parents had plenty of trouble with me. And even now I often want to run and jump or go chasing off somewhere, or do something that isn't in the programme or the time-table—just something I want. It isn't when you've lived a great many years that you get

old, but when you forget about being a child. I'd like to jump every day, but Vassili Andreyevich lives on the other side of the wall. And he's a very serious man. He must never know we play 'chika'."

"But we aren't playing. You only showed me."

"We can play not for money, just for fun. But all the same, don't give me away to Vassili Andreyevich."

Heavens, the things that can happen! It wasn't so long since I'd been terrified that Lydia Mikhailovna would take me to the headmaster for gambling, and now she was asking me not to give her away. A miracle, nothing else. I looked about me, scared, although I couldn't have said why, and blinked in confusion.

"Well, shall we try? We can stop if you don't like it."

"All right," I said hesitantly.

"You start."

We picked up our coins. I could see that Lydia Mikhailovna really had played, while I was just getting my eye in, I was not yet clear how to make the coin strike the wall—on its edge or flat, how high, and how much force I needed. My strokes were blind, if we'd been reckoning I'd have lost plenty in the first minutes, although actually there was nothing so very difficult about "chika". And of course, it was embarrassing to be playing with Lydia Mikhailovna, and that added to my awkwardness. I could never have dreamed of it, even in my wildest imaginings. It took time before I got myself in hand, and when I did and began to give my attention to the play, Lydia Mikhailovna stopped it.

"No, this isn't interesting," she said, straightening up and pushing back the hair from her eyes. "If we're going to play, then—real play; we're like three-year-olds! "

"But that'll be—gambling," I mumbled hesitantly.

"Of course. But what have we got in our hands? Nothing else takes the place of play for money. That's both good and bad. We can make the stakes quite tiny, but all the same there's interest, excitement, a thrill." I said nothing—I didn't know what to say.

"Are you really afraid? " Lydia Mikhailovna stung me.

"Not likely! I'm not afraid of anything."

I had some small change with me. I gave Lydia Mikhailovna her coin and got my own from my pocket. All right, Lydia Mikhailovna, we'll gamble if that's what you

want. What do I care, I didn't start it. Vadik too thought nothing of me at first, but then he changed his mind and used his fists. I learned there. I can learn here. This isn't French! And in time I'll bridle that French, too!

I had to agree to one condition: since Lydia Mikhailovna's hand was bigger and her fingers longer, she measured with thumb and middle finger, while I used thumb and little finger. That was fair and I agreed.

We began again. We moved from the room to the entry where there was more room, and struck against a smooth wooden partition. We struck, got down on our knees, crawled about the floor bumping into one another, stretching our fingers to measure, then getting up again, while Lydia Mikhailovna announced the reckoning. She played noisily, squealed, clapped her hands, teased me—in fact she was more like a schoolgirl than a teacher; I wanted to yell at her sometimes. But all the same she won and I lost. Before I knew where I was, I had lost eighty kopecks; with great difficulty I reduced it to thirty, but then Lydia Mikhailovna's coin fell from a distance on mine which brought my debt up to fifty again. I began to worry. We had agreed to settle up at the end of the play, but if it went on like this, I soon wouldn't have enough. I had only a little over a ruble. So I mustn't let it pass the ruble, or I'd be disgraced, a lifelong disgrace.

Suddenly I saw that Lydia Mikhailovna wasn't trying to win. When she measured her fingers were bent; where she said she couldn't reach the coin, I reached it without any difficulty. I rose, offended.

"No," I said, "I won't play like this. It isn't honest."

"But I really can't reach it," she protested. "My fingers are sort of wooden."

"You can."

"All right, all right, I'll try."

I don't know how it is in mathematics, but in life the clearest proof comes from opposites. When I saw the next day that Lydia Mikhailovna slyly moved a coin closer so as to touch it, I was thunderstruck. Somehow or other she didn't seem to notice when she looked at me that I had seen her obvious cheating, she went on moving the coin.

"What are you doing? " I said indignantly.

"Me? What do you mean?"

"Why did you move it?"

"But I didn't, it was right here." She denied it, Lydia Mikhailovna did, brazenly, almost gladly—just like Vadik or Chicken.

Of all things! And a teacher, too! I had seen for myself, from twenty centimetres' distance, that she had touched the coin, and there she was insisting that she hadn't touched it, and laughing at me, too. Did she think I was blind? Or a small kid? A teacher of French! I forgot completely that only yesterday she had been trying to make me win and only watched to see that she didn't cheat. Lydia Mikhailovna, indeed!

That day we had spent only fifteen or twenty minutes on French, and after that it was even less. We had another interest. Lydia Mikhailovna would have me read a passage, correct me, hear me once more, and then we would start play. After two small losses I started to win. I soon got the idea of "chika", probed all its secrets, knew how and where to strike.

So I had money again. I could go to the market and buy milk, now in frozen circles. I carefully cut the cream off the top of the disk, pushed the crumbling icy fragments into my mouth and felt its filling sweetness in my whole body. Then I turned the disk upside down and with my knife hacked off the greenish sweetish bottom. The rest I thawed and drank with a piece of black bread.

So that was all right, I could manage; and very soon, when the war damage was repaired, things would be better for everyone.

Of course, I felt uncomfortable, taking money from Lydia Mikhailovna, but I told myself it was honest winnings. I never asked to play, it was always her suggestion. I did not venture to refuse. I thought she enjoyed it, she was gay, she laughed and pulled me about.

If we could have known beforehand how it was all going to end!

Kneeling in front of one another, we were arguing about the count. I believe we'd been arguing about something else before that, too.

"Get it into your fat head," she said, moving towards me, waving her hands, "why would I trick you? I'm

doing the counting, not you. I know better. I lost three times running, and before that there was 'chika'."

"I don't count that."

"Why not?"

"You'd 'chika' too."

We were shouting, interrupting each other, when all of a sudden we heard a surprised, if not appalled, but firm, ringing voice.

"Lydia Mikhailovna!"

We froze. Vassili Andreyevich was standing in the doorway.

"What's the matter with you? What's going on here?"

Slowly, very slowly, Lydia Mikhailovna rose from her knees, red and tousled, and smoothed back her hair.

"I should have expected you to knock before coming in, Vassili Andreyevich."

"I did knock. Nobody answered. What's going on here—will you please explain? I have the right to know, as headmaster."

"We're playing 'chika'," she said quietly.

"You're playing for money—with him?" Vassili Andreyevich jerked a thumb at me, and I, terrified, crawled behind the partition to hide in the room. "Gambling—with a pupil? Have I understood you rightly?"

"Yes."

"You—" The headmaster choked, gasped for air. "I'm at a loss for words. Your conduct! It's a crime! Corruption! Perversion! And—and—I've worked in schools for twenty years, I've seen many things in my time, but this—!" He flung up his hands.

* * *

Three days later Lydia Mikhailovna left. On her last evening she met me after school and walked home with me.

"I'm going back to the Kuban," she said as we parted. "You go on with your studies and don't worry, nothing'll happen to you for this foolish business. I'm the one to blame. So study and do well." She rumpled my hair and went.

I never saw her again.

In the middle of winter, just after the January holidays, a parcel came to the school by post. When I opened the box—with that same axe from under the stairs—I saw macaroni lying in neat rows. Under them, in a wrapping of cotton wool, were three red apples.

Up to then I had seen apples only in pictures, but I guessed what they were.

NIKOLAI EVDOKIMOV

(b. 1922)

He was born in a small village in Byelorussia. In the '40s he graduated from the Gorky Literary Institute and published his first story in 1946. Soviet readers are well acquainted with his long short stories *The Sinner, A Simple Tale, The Death Notice* and with his novels *The Story of Nyurka—a Town-Dweller* and *Memory Has its Own Laws.*

In his works Evdokimov concentrates entirely on spiritual experiences and excludes practically all the minutiae of daily life from his prose. One of the ideas central to the writer in recent years has been that the total spiritual recovery of man, mutilated by war, may still be attained. He cannot reconcile himself to the fact that the time of the "warm, dearly loved, integral ... man" (A. Platonov) has passed forever for such people.

Evdokimov's favourite heroes are inspired by a difficult and agonising love, akin to self-sacrifice. It is as though they were born to warm the hearts of those dear to them and encourage them to fulfil their duty to their people and their country.

A SIMPLE TALE

Two wars had ended—against the Germans and against the Japanese, and the soldiers were going home, some in this direction, others in that. Frolov spent the winter in barracks and got his demobilisation papers in the early spring when thin spears of grass were thrusting up, he said goodbye to his comrades of his Guards unit and set off for his own country. The war had taken him to strange places—through Poland, Germany, Hungary and right to Austria! Now he was taking the return route, through Hungary, Germany and Poland, as a liberator, a Guardsman, singing Strauss waltzes. All the other soldiers were going home, but Frolov had no particular destination: he was alone in the world, with neither family nor relatives. He had been born during the Civil War, his father, a revolutionary fighter in the Red Army, his mother, a farm labourer whom the revolution had freed from grinding toil for a big landowner. But Serafim knew little of parental affection, he lost father and mother when still at the trustful age of ten. It happened all at

once, in a single hour, when the small river flowing through their village suddenly burst its banks and came rushing out disastrously. Ever since then he had lived where chance took him—in other people's homes, in orphanages, here and there, with no permanent home or fixed affections.

Although his direction was vague, however, he did have one definite objective. This objective was feminine and was called Nastya—Anastasia Ivanovna Silina. When they forced the Vistula he had been decorated with the Order of Glory (1st class). There had been articles about him in the papers, describing how he had burst into an enemy pillbox, captured it with a submachine-gun, then turned the German heavy machine-gun against the fleeing enemy. Just exactly how he had done it all he did not clearly remember: the approaches were mined and under such heavy fire that a mouse could not have got through. Frolov couldn't believe he had really done it, but the fact was there.

After the newspaper articles he received a number of admiring letters from girls, lauding his courage and gallantry and hoping he would perform more heroic feats. One of them caught his attention—he could not himself have said why. It was from Anastasia Ivanovna Silina. (Twenty-four, unmarried, blonde, with blue eyes, finished junior secondary and a ledger clerk's course). Frolov wrote back and asked for her photograph. She sent one, and asked for one of him. He liked her face even more than her letter and sent a reply in verse:

You are lovely as a flower
Growing in a sheltered glade;
But frost can nip it in an hour,
Your loveliness will never fade.

He did not send his own picture, however, because he had none. By the time he got one taken in Austria they were corresponding regularly, and he felt that Nastya was very close to him. When at last, however, he did send a picture the correspondence broke off abruptly. Evidently she was disappointed. And of course, Frolov was no Adonis, with his big nose, big mouth and rather protruding eyes. Far from a maiden's dream. So the correspondence stopped, but he still kept Nastya's

picture. He often took it out, and sometimes even touched it with his lips.

We'll see how it works out, he thought when he found himself a civilian again and set off to take his chance, to appear out of the blue. Perhaps she would like him after all. And if not, well, he would just go on somewhere else.

The settlement where she lived was called Yolkino. The Germans had not been there, they had been halted a hundred kilometres away. It had a furniture factory making tables and stools, and a cooperative making nails. And that was the whole of Yolkino's industry.

Frolov left the train and set off to look for Nastya's house. Women turned to watch him pass—a returned soldier!—and hazarded guesses which house he would enter. He turned on Railway Street to house number twelve.

An old man was sitting on the roof mending holes in rusty iron with tar-paper. Frolov greeted him with the courtesy of a man who respects himself. The old man's reply was choked by a fit of coughing. Frolov waited until it passed off.

"Does Anastasia Ivanovna live here? "

"What? None o' that name here. Or mebbe it's Nastya you're seeking? What's the last name? "

"Silina."

"Aye, that's our Nastya. My graddatter. Give her a shout, she's in the house. Hey, Nastya! "

A door creaked and Frolov saw his dream standing on the threshold. She was even better than her picture. His throat was dry with excitement and gladness. She was small, quite plump for those hungry days, with black brows, a small mouth and fair fluffy hair; to Frolov she looked wonderful.

"Hu-hullo," said Frolov.

"Do I know you? "

"Is your memory that bad? I've got your picture still. The one you sent me."

"Mercy, of all things! " Nastya burst out laughing and waved a hand helplessly as she recognised Frolov. "Dropped down all of a sudden. What have you come for? Funny! "

"We did write to each other."

"Write—" She shrugged. "But that was a long time ago and just—silly."

She smiled—a kind, gentle, pleasant smile. He revelled in her smile. Her words might be acid, but the smile was sweet. He smiled too.

"And there was me thinking you'd be expecting me and waiting for me. You did hint something of the kind in your letters."

"Oh, yes, for sure. Waiting to fall at your feet! There wasn't any hint at all. Get that right out of your head."

"So I can just turn round and go away again? "

"Take it as you like." She frowned and looked away.

Frolov stood another moment, realised there was nothing for him here: tactfully, with no sign of offence, he said goodbye and went.

Dusk was falling. Frolov walked about the streets to calm down, to think over his situation and decide what he should do now. It began to rain, a chilly wind rose and he shivered. He was tired, too. He had eaten nothing since morning. He had lived on his nerves all day, now he had dropped from the heights and he ached with weariness.

In the station waiting room he lay down on a bench and tried to sleep. He was alone, nobody disturbed him, but sleep would not come. He turned from side to side, groaning, then, caught by a sudden fear that he might oversleep the train, he rose, and went to look for a timetable.

Trains were passing in all directions, but not one of them stopped here at night, he could sleep undisturbed until quite late in the morning. But now he had lost his desire to sleep, the time he had spent lying on the bench had eased his weariness. He felt quite energetic, but his thoughts were cheerless. He was waiting for a train, but he had nowhere to go. Or to be more exact, it was all the same where he went, north, south, east or west. His place was everywhere and nowhere.

He went to the stationmaster's office to beg a smoke. It was not so long since the war had ended and tobacco was still short, a smoker could give away his last shirt but would think twice about his last tobacco. But still, Frolov hoped that the stationmaster—if he were a smo-

ker, that is—would give him enough for a puff or two. He had no tobacco of his own, a week previously he had stopped smoking because he wanted to come to Nastya not as he had been at the front, but clean in every way—he had even refused to drink when he had left his unit. Dropping smoking had been surprisingly easy, evidently his love for Nastya helped. But now, when he found it meant nothing to her whether he smoked, whether he drank or whether he walked the earth at all, he regretted his rash break with a habit of his organism, a sacrifice nobody needed, not even himself.

The stationmaster was a smoker, and not niggardly. He tipped out a whole handful of tobacco so that Frolov would be supplied for a time. Frolov drew the smoke in deeply and to his own surprise his head did not swim although sour saliva filled his mouth. He spat it out with some difficulty and said, "Fine! " although he felt far from fine. But "fine" was what he said, and then it occurred to him that really he was not so badly off. He was alive, healthy, young, he had quite a show of decorations on his tunic, and in his pocket a whole packet of addresses of army friends. If he visited each of them and stayed for only a week or two, he could go on like that until he was old. As for Nastya, it was surely no go. At the front he had been wounded only once, in the arm; extraordinary it was that throughout these years that was all the German bullets had been able to do to him. Well, Nastya's indifference could be counted as payment for his good luck at the front. This wound too would ache for a while, then heal over, as wounds did.

The stationmaster liked to talk and possessed a healthy curiosity; it took him only a few moments to find out that Frolov had no native place, no parents, wife or home.

"All the better," he said, "you're your own master. You can settle down where you want. It's worse, going back to find your home destroyed. But this way—well—if there's nothing, there's nothing, and everything's all right. The tears there are these days! Eh, what tears! A man comes back and finds out his wife's secrets and starts beating her. He's a fool. And a son of a bitch. You can be sure he's had his fun with the girls while he's been away, and back he comes and starts plaguing his

woman—maybe she's been giving the wrong looks to someone. He doesn't want to understand that a woman isn't a block of wood, she's alive and got her feelings, too. All this bed business can be washed away, but love—that's the thing to worry about. Worse if she's fallen in love with someone even if she hasn't slept with him. Love gets right into her soul, but all this sleeping—pah, it's come and gone in a moment."

Frolov marvelled at this philosophy—how could it be just washed away, and for that matter, a real woman would never go to bed with a man she didn't love, like an animal. If he, Frolov, had had a wife, he'd never have forgiven her. Not even Nastya, if she'd been his wife. A person has to be able to master natural instincts.

Frolov's imagination called up a vivid picture: he returned home and found a man with nicotine-yellow moustache, clothed—or unclothed—in a way that left no room for doubt. Nastya threw herself on her knees, stretched out white hands which had only just this moment been caressing the yellow-moustached man, but Frolov pushed her away and perhaps—why not? —brandished the axe standing by the door.

He felt quite upset over the picture conjured up by his extremely lively imagination; he went out and started wandering about the station in the darkness, telling himself it was absurd, out of all reason, to let imagination torment him like this. What was not, was not. And what was, disappointing as it might be, was good because it *was*. All human suffering and troubles come from too much imagination and too many wishes. The less you want the more you get, the less you hope for the more your hopes come true. He, Frolov, had hardly hoped to come through that dreadful war alive, but alive he was, walking the earth, breathing the pure air, smoking and debating how to build his life. But he might very well have been beneath that earth. Was he any better than others? Not at all, only luckier. So it worked out that his bad luck with Nastya, if you looked at it from another angle, was actually real good luck.

So—reasonably—he ought not to mope, he ought to go to some town with plenty of noise and bustle and plenty of people all round. And there, among all those people, he would surely find some other

Nastya who would make him happy. That was the thing to do.

Frolov went back to the waiting room and lay down on the bench.

He lay down and fell asleep, right away at once. He had wanted to think of something more, but fell asleep before he had time—the way he had learned in the trenches, instantaneously and dreamlessly.

Late in the morning a train came in. The coaches were old and bullet-pitted as though they had had smallpox. It smelt of medicines. Perhaps it had been a dressing station, who could say?

Frolov did not go inside, he remained standing on the end platform to breathe good air.

The whole train was evidently on its last legs, it staggered and groaned. A soldier with a red face, flat like a frying pan, tried to edge Frolov away to the back of the platform, but he saw what the game was and skilfully edged the soldier back. And then he saw Nastya's house, the old man on the roof, the wood-pile beside it, the curtain in the window, and it brought such a stab in his heart that he forgot everything else. He knew that it was no good going anywhere carrying this pain, if he did go away, he would always be pulled to this house and that window curtain. He must not go, for it was wisely said that man makes his own happiness. If it was all the same where he lived, why should he live somewhere else when everything drew him back here? However far he went, he would find no peace; he knew himself, knew his weak, foolish heart in which his parents had planted pity and a longing for something permanent.

Frolov tossed his pack off the moving train and jumped down.

The first thing was to find work. He found it—a very decent job, more the office style than physical—manager of the factory stores. Actually, the warehouse was nothing imposing, but taking the size of the settlement into account his job was a good one; the warehouse and contents showed every prospect of expansion, it was no dead-end job, there was real promise of increasing responsibility and promotion.

His salary, too, was very decent. Of course, if he had had a family to support it would have been scanty, but

he was alone. And as an ex-soldier he was given a special ration card.

He was reckoned as part of the managerial staff. Not a very important part, but still—a manager, although he had only one subordinate, a grey mare with melancholy eyes and a sagging back. Nobody knew her name. It might have been known by the former manager, but he had died suddenly a fortnight before and taken the secret with him. The mare was old and thin. She had appeared in the settlement some months before, left behind as useless by an artillery battery which was being shifted from the West to the Far East. Nobody knew her history, of course, but as it had been a Guards battery she had probably seen plenty of action.

Any living soul close to humans must have name. Frolov scratched his head and respectfully called the mare Soldatka—soldier girl, with reference to her military past.

She had her own ways, had Soldatka; she had never gone to anybody or allowed anybody to approach her after the former manager died. She had wandered about the settlement and its environs in proud isolation, refusing all contacts. But to Frolov she came herself, pushed her head into his greatcoat and whinnied softly when he rubbed her long, shapely neck.

It was a youthful, affectionate, sad whinny. He did not hear that note of sadness at first and moved away, but then it caught his heart and he returned, looked into her eyes and understood something which he could not have expressed in words but which he drew in as one draws in scents, memories or pain; he understood that all things living are linked by some kind of indistinct threads. His greatcoat still smelled of war, the horse had caught the feel of the trenches which penetrates like dust not so much into the body of a soldier as into his very inmost self, even if that soldier is four-legged.

So Soldatka met Frolov when he came to the warehouse with her quiet whinny, rubbed her head against his great coat and waited for his responsive caress. He clapped her bony grey crupper and dust flew up as it might from an old carpet.

Frolov found a stiff brush and curry-comb, brushed her and washed her in the river; when she emerged she

arched her fine slender neck so that her mane floated in the wind, and her smooth wet hide shimmered in the sunshine. She bit her tender foam-covered lip, rolled her violet eyes and followed Frolov lightly through the settlement to the warehouse.

At night Frolov shut her up in the warehouse yard so that she would not stray—every being must have a home. She had hers, he had his.

His was only relatively his; he had not been given a place by the factory although one was promised in the near future; for the present he rented a room from Granny Filippovna.

Granny lived close to the railway station, a considerable distance from the warehouse, so Frolov had to take the bus each day. That was inconvenient. But he had deliberately sought a room in that district for the very purpose of taking the bus to work. Convenience too is relative, and for Frolov the inconvenience of the bus was a very great convenience.

Several people advised him against lodging with Granny Filippovna; she had queer ways. For the most part she was quite ordinary, but she could talk only of one thing—her sons, killed at the front in the very last days of the war. However, this did not really trouble Frolov very much; the war had not exactly hardened him to suffering, but blunted his sensibilities. Their sharp edge had dulled right at the beginning, when he had seen that tiny little girl wandering about the ashes of a village Smolensk way—a child so small she could not even wipe her nose. Instead of a frock she had a big shawl wound round her and crossed in front. One end trailed along the ground. She trod on it, stumbled and went down—flop!—on her bare bottom or buried her nose in black cinders, picked herself up and then—down again. It might have been funny—but it wasn't, it was dreadful, because she was walking over the ruins of her home, clapping her hands, as though she were catching mosquitoes or playing at "clap handies". And alongside, in the hot sun, lay her mother, just a girl, not more than twenty. She lay quietly, without stirring, staring fixedly into the blue sky. This was the picture Frolov saw at the very beginning of the war, and it was one he never forgot. He saw many things later, many terrible things, but for him the

worst of all was embodied in that tiny girl and her young, dead mother.

So depressing as granny's talk was, it did not affect him too profoundly. He had rented her room, so far from work, because he wanted to be close to Nastya. The house stood just opposite the bus stop, and Frolov found out that every morning at the same time Nastya came out and took that bus to the bath-house, where she sold the tickets.

On his first morning in his new home Frolov wakened early and sat down by the window to observe. His expectations were justified: at seven-eighteen Nastya appeared. He pulled on his coat and in the most casual manner left the cottage. His heart was thudding as though he were starting off on a wartime assignment. Nastya looked very urban; her coat was neat and she was not in a headkerchief, let alone bareheaded, no, she wore a brown hat with a black flower in it. Frolov already felt himself shrinking in size with every step he took towards her, and that hat with its flower crushed him, as though he were guilty of real impudence in even thinking of forcing his attentions on someone far above him. However, he fought the feeling down and marched to the stop with a confident soldier's tread.

Nastya recognised him—with considerable surprise.

"What are you doing here? I thought you'd gone. Or are these your own parts? "

"Uhuh, I'm from round here."

"And I was thinking—oh well," said Nastya with a certain note of disappointment. She had evidently been much flattered by the thought that he had come specially on her account. But Frolov decided that flattery was not the wisest course, more reserved tactics would be better, so he kept up his lie.

"Yes, I'm from here. Did you think I was from somewhere far off? "

"Uhuh."

"No, here. And now I've got a job, I'm factory stores manager."

"Oh? " Nastya's tone was one of complete indifference, and she turned away.

Again Frolov felt like some insignificant insect; it was an unpleasant feeling, one he had never had before, only here, beside Nastya.

The bus came round the corner, lurching over the holes and hummocks of the road like a boat on the waves. It was crowded and stuffy, with plenty of jostling. But none of that mattered to Frolov, to him the only person there was Nastya. It was for her the bus had come, for her the sun emerged from the clouds. The bus took on other passengers as a favour, so that it would be more interesting, more cheerful, warmer for Nastya.

Nastya's stop was two after Frolov's, but that didn't worry him, he went on and got out with her.

"Are you planning to take a bath? " she asked slyly.

"No. I just wanted to deliver you safe and sound to your destination."

"My goodness, what a polite cavalier! If you'd any idea of coming in, I have to warn you there's no hot water today."

"What do I want with hot water? My blood's hot enough," and he laughed at his own joke. But he laughed alone, Nastya saw an underlying hint in it.

"I don't like that sort of talk."

Frolov walked to the warehouse. He could not understand himself. He ought to have been happy about meeting Nastya, yet somehow he wasn't. On the contrary, he felt a weariness, as though he had been carrying a burden all the way from the bus-stop to the bath-house and was still carrying it back to the warehouse—a burden too heavy for him. Ah, Nastya, Nastya, was it for joy or sadness that Frolov's heart had attached itself so closely to you?

Arrived at the warehouse, he was able to forget his troubles for a while. There was plenty to do; it was no easy matter to handle such a big place alone, with no assistant. He had to examine all the corners, make out a list of the stores and other materials, and introduce some kind of order, for order there was none. His predecessor had not believed in overworking. That werehouse contained every kind of thing, necessary or unnecessary for the furniture factory: working clothes, gas masks, electric motors, scenery belonging to the drama club, empty boxes and packing cases, ten-litre bottles, three carts, six sledges, one sculptured figure of a naked girl, athlete throwing a discus, various paints and lacquers, nails and other important and trivial things which had been put

down on the inventory and had to be stored for a long time.

Frolov spent the whole day sorting everything out, establishing the order he considered best and freeing space for anything else that would be coming in. By evening, tired out, he fed Soldatka and went home.

These were the general lines of his new peacetime life. In the morning he watched for Nastya through the window, hurried out to meet her and accompanied her to the bath-house. Then he worked on the stores until he ached all over, and in the evenings helped Granny Filippovna in her kitchen garden, or rested alone on the porch. He would sit there, leaning back, legs stretched out, smoking and breathing the clear evening air.

Cows came drifting back from the pasture. They were lean and weak, the bones jutted out through their hides like the springs of an old sofa. Hungry dogs wandered about the streets. The sound of an accordion came from the club, the girls sang couplets and when darkness fell, dancing began. Frolov went a couple of times, but then stopped. There was no point in going because Nastya did not come to join the dancing.

Sometimes his neighbour Romka Kochin, a lame railway coupler of twenty-six, came and sat with Frolov. Romka had not been called up because of injury: he had been hurt by a tractor as a child, and came down with a lurch on his right leg, as though he were bowing alternately to right and left. But he was gook-looking and well-made, and most of the women were after him. Nothing surprising in that, if one remembers that he was practically the only young man in the settlement.

Romka lived alone. The cottage was old but well built, so that he had a secure refuge—although its security was only temporary. Instead of Romka, his young wife Anfisa Grigoryevna had been at the front throughout the war; she ought to be coming home any day, but for some reason she was held up abroad—in golden Prague, or maybe the gay city of Bucharest.

Romka smoked Frolov's tobacco, spat, and held forth on the subject of women.

"They're all the same. All of 'em hot for it. Gets boring. That woman of mine's getting it right and left

out there, that's sure. Well, to hell with it. I'll forgive her. Give her a buffet as is proper and let it go."

However, it all turned out very differently from what he expected.

Early one morning, watching through the window for Nastya, Frolov saw a woman in an army greatcoat and forage cap, a pack on her back, and wearing box-calf top-boots that fitted snugly round her plump calves. Those calves caught his eye, they were remarkably attractive. She walked with a firm, heavy tread, swinging her arms like a man, passed Frolov's window and turned into the next yard, to Romka. This must be the wife.

Romka was caught—caught with his current mistress, the plump waitress Shurka Komolova. She caught them in a situation which left no room for doubt, picked up a bucket yoke, set about both of them, and drove them out into the yard. The whole street came running to see the show.

"You rutting dog! Rear rat! " Anfisa screamed. "There we were, shedding our blood out there, and here's him, the dirty goat, having his fun with drabs. I'll kill you! "

There were voices from the crowd, some egging her on, others jeering at Romka and Shurka.

"Quite right! He's earned it! The dirty pig! Give it for him, Anfisa," the old women called. But the younger ones were more lenient.

"Let him be, Anfisa! He's the only man in three streets! "

There was general laughter because it really was a ridiculous sight. For Romka, Shurka and Anfisa it was drama, but for the spectators—comedy.

"And you coming round to gawk! Licking your lips! " Anfisa screamed at the women. "All right, take the louse! You can have him! "

She spat, threw down the yoke by the shed, went into the cottage and locked the door; Romka's shirt and Shurka's shoes came flying out through the window.

She remained shut in until the evening, storming at anyone who ventured to knock. Then she went into the yard, saw Frolov planting potatoes in Granny Filippovna's kitchen garden, and called to him in a tired voice.

"Hey, you over there! "

"Well?"

"A soldier, are you?"

"Well?"

"Enough wells and you'll drown in 'em. Get anything to smoke?"

"Yes."

She gave the fence a push with her shoulder to test its strength, then climbed over.

"Where are you from? I don't call you to mind."

"Not from these parts, I came because I'd an interest here."

"Dope! What interest? This place is no good. Folks neither flesh nor fish. It's betwixt and between place, neither town nor village, a mess. And the folks the same. What's your interest? A woman?"

"Want to know a lot, don't you?"

"One o' the secretive sort." She rolled a cigarette and lit it. "It's naught to me, to hell with your interest. Which front were you on?"

"The Third Ukrainian."

"Go on, tell another."

"Now look." Frolov was getting angry. "You mind your tongue."

"I was on the Third Ukrainian myself, would you believe it," she said with pleased surprise. "So we fought right alongside." Frolov laughed sceptically.

"Uhuh, fought. Some fought, some—"

"Yes, you've guessed it. I was in the regimental reconnaissance. Drop that spade, let's talk. Drop it, I tell you!"

She wanted to see if they had ever met, since they had been so close, but they hadn't. They had moved along parallel lines, through parallel villages, but like parallel lines in general had never met. They had even been stationed in the same town at the same time and in the same street, but had never noticed one another. But they did find common acquaintances. Not close ones, but still—acquaintances. True, they were of higher rank, one a divisional commander, another still higher, an army commander. Anfisa and Frolov knew them both mainly by name, but still, it was pleasant to remember them and even gossip about them.

Frolov offered Anfisa his tobacco again, she thanked him politely and skilfully rolled a cigarette. He was ready

to continue wartime recollections, but Granny Filippovna came creeping out to lament over Anfisa as over a fresh grave.

"But my sons, my fine handsome sons, they'll never come back to me, Anfisa, never, never. Oh, the sorrow and the grief! "

She wept, Anfisa wept with her, put her arm round the old woman and led her indoors to listen to her unconsolable grief. Frolov sighed as he watched them go. He felt for the old woman as he always did, but now he was sorry for Anfisa, too; what a wretched thing to happen: a woman comes back to her own hearth and home, and straight away—family trouble. He pitied her, too, because at the front she had lost her proper nature, she was neither man nor woman, but something in between. A soldier—that was her sex, her calling, her profession. In short, a hen isn't a bird and soldier in a skirt is neither woman nor maid.

Dusk was falling. Frolov decided to go to bed as soon as he had looked through the paper—when else should he read it but before bed? However, Anfisa came to the window.

"Come over to me, I've got a half-litre bottle. I brought it for that man. Now—the way it is, we'd best down it together, eh? Drink to my homecoming! As for him, I'll bite off his ear or his nose! Here, come over, I can't sit and drink vodka alone. Or shall I bring it over? "

"Bring it along," said Frolov. Who'd refuse vodka?

He was not the big, burly kind but he could take his drinks and more than one. But Anfisa kept up with him, she would drink, sniff a salt cucumber and start off a song. Her speaking voice was of ordinary timbre, only roughened by smoking, but when she sang she produced a high thin thread of voice like a spider-web. First she sang patriotic songs.

The people are my father,
My mother is the land....

When the bottle was empty she turned to plaintive songs of love.

Oh, the cornflowers, the cornflowers,
Growing thickly in the corn,

Gathering them by the river
With Olya on a dewy morn.

She finished the verse and burst into tears. But women's tears were something Frolov couldn't stand.

"Stop that snivelling," he ordered and Anfisa quietened. She blew her nose and asked, "Fat—what's that?" And she answered her own question, "Wind. That's what it is. You eat it and don't know what you've got!"

"And to hell with it, plain wind or clotted." He scraped the last of the pork from the tin. "I've got my own ways o' thinking."

"Eh, just ig-nor-ant," said Anfisa. "Now me, I've seen people wi' real learning. There was our senior lieutenant, now there's brains! And what a handsome boy! 'Anfisa,' he'd say, 'be so good as to bring me aitch-two-o.' Water, that is, that's the way they call it scien-tif-ically."

"And who doesn't know that?" said Frolov with dignity. "Everyone knows it."

"And those stars called Cassiopeia—who knows that? Mebbe you know it? And that there's that relativity all round—you know that? Time's relative. And life's relative. You're relative to me, and me to you. See?"

"Think I'm a fool?" Frolov was offended. "I got my schooling too."

"Nay, but that's a thing you can't understand nor me, neither, it was only him as understood it. But they killed him, the senior lieutenant."

She sobbed, started to cry but caught Frolov's frown and pulled herself together.

"Well—all right," she said. "Thanks for your company. I'll go."

"No, why, sit awhile." He got out a quarter-litre saved for some special occasion. There was nothing so very special about this, it's true, but since they'd started drinking, why keep it back? But Anfisa refused.

"Nay, thank you kindly, but I'll go sleep, I'm right tired. And I'm real glad to have met you."

"It's mutual," Frolov answered politely.

She went. Frolov cleared the table, threw away the cigarette ends and made his bed up. He was taking off his boots when Anfisa returned.

"Have you put that bottle away? Come on, get it out!"

"Not had your fill?"

"Uhuh. Could do wi' another drink."

Frolov poured the vodka out into the glasses. They drank. Anfisa frowned and spat.

"Brr! Muck! How can men drink it?" she laughed artificially. "And that fool Romka of mine, d'ye know what? He's there, ye get me—lying there in bed, an' white sheets on it, like a good, decent man, waiting for me, the bastard. Like water off a duck's back. Dolt! But I'm not starting any more three-ring circus, he can just wait. Aren't I right?"

"That's your own private business," said Frolov cautiously. "I can't give you advice."

"No, no more circus. But he'd better learn I mean what I say. I told him straight—tomorrow *auf Wiedersehen*, he can get the hell out so's there's neither hide nor hair of him."

"And you?"

"Me—what?"

"Where'll you sleep?"

"Where?" She burst out laughing. "With you! Or don't you want me? Maybe I don't suit you—eh?"

"Don't play the fool."

"I'm not doing." She laughed again—a strange, wild laughter; whether she really had decided to sleep with him or not—who could say?

She had. With a look of wry mockery she pulled off her tunic, disclosing a pink German slip so transparent that her sunburnt body gleamed through it temptingly.

"Well, looked your fill, now turn your back. You'll see plenty more this night. And get your clothes off."

But Frolov made no move. A gust of anger swept him. Deciding for him as though he were some insensate *thing*, or a husband or lover.

"Who're you ordering about?" he snapped. "Did you think to ask me? What if I don't want you? Go to your Romka!"

"I wouldn't take him for a million now. I'm particular, I am. He can just go to the devil! I came flying back to him on wings, and he dashed me down to earth. What are you standing there for?" she gulped—something between a giggle and a sob.

Serafim ground his teeth, snatched up his greatcoat and went outside. He could not trample on his feeling for Nastya. And anyway, he was not sure whether Anfisa really wanted him—more likely she was saying anything that came into her head, from sheer bitterness. So that night he slept with the chickens in the shed. It wasn't very comfortable, but he made himself a bed out of some sort of rubbish in a corner, and managed not too badly.

Frolov slept through the night without any particular disturbance except for being wakened occasionally by a cock hoarse with age that crowed with unpleasing haughtiness. Frolov angrily flung a hunk of wood at him. He thought he had hit him, and granny's hens would be widowed with a definite loss for herself, but when he rose he found the cock pecking away in the kitchen garden and greeted him gladly.

"Wish you good health, Comrade General! "

The cock, however, only clucked angrily and stalked off; it looked as though Frolov had mistaken his rank.

Anfisa was asleep on Frolov's bed. She lay on her back, head thrown back. He did not waken her, he found some slippery cold potatoes in granny's pot, ate them with black bread and went to the bus stop to wait for Nastya.

That day, however, Nastya did not appear. The bus came and went, and no sign of her. Frolov wondered if he had missed her, his head still muzzy with the drink, so he went off to the bath-house on foot. The bath-house was open but Polya from the women's section was in Nastya's place at the pay-desk. Why Nastya hadn't come she didn't know, nor did anyone else; something must have happened.

Frolov hurried through his work at the warehouse, but with all his haste it took him until dinner time. Then he walked quickly to Nastya's house.

Fortunately, it was nothing serious; grandad had a stomach upset, he had vomited badly, they had had to send for a doctor. Now he was asleep after taking his medicine and Nastya was resting in the yard. She laughed when she saw Frolov.

"You turned up again? What d'you want? " It was said with her usual childlike forthrightness.

"Of course I turn up—you weren't at work—"

"So you represent the bath-house manager? "

"No. Myself. Anything could have happened."

"Don't worry. I'm safe and sound. Since you've come, here's an axe, the pig's pushed the fence down. Can you manage? "

"Why not? " Frolov cried gladly and went off to fix the sagging fence.

The job was easy enough. He closed up the hole and drove in a support for a rotting post while he was about it. Nastya came and watched him working. He winked and she smiled—a good, friendly smile. And that smile sent a pleasant shiver down him, as though he'd come under a shower of warm rain.

"You love me, Serafim." It was a statement, not a question.

"Yes, I love you." He looked into her calm blue eyes.

"What for? What does it give you? "

"Nothing, I'm just hoping you'll take notice of me."

"I won't."

His heart sank icily, but he mastered himself and even forced a laugh.

"Who knows, maybe you'll get pricks of conscience and notice me all the same? "

"Get that out of your head. You're being silly! " She looked at him almost tenderly. It was that look of hers—clear and open, guileless and kind that always left him bewildered, her words said one thing, her eyes another. Now he read promise in them. And although he well knew it was not her words which should be doubted, but those eyes, he nevertheless wanted to believe them; so—blindly—he believed her eyes and not her words.

"Why shouldn't I think it? " he persisted. "You're free, there isn't anyone else. Or is there? "

"No."

"Why not? "

"You want to know a lot." She frowned. "Maybe it's because I haven't found one to suit me."

"And maybe I'm that right one? "

"No, Serafim. And don't torment yourself," she said almost tenderly.

"Why did you say those things—hints, sort of—in your letters? " he asked reproachfully.

"Well, I shouldn't have, but it can't be helped now. I wrote because I was feeling low, everything was so frightening."

Silence. Then she asked, "What do you love me for, Serafim—eh?"

"What does a man love a woman for? Well—the same."

"But what?" She asked as though she knew well enough what he loved her for but very much wanted to hear it from himself.

"The secret of you."

This was not what Nastya had expected.

"What secret are you talking about?"

"Every person has some sort of secret. There's none without it."

"No one at all?"

"No. If there was one he'd be worth nothing. But there aren't any without a hidden secret."

"And what's my secret?" Again she asked as though she knew the answer.

"A secret's a secret just because none knows it. You can go through your life and never guess it."

"Really?" She raised her brows and looked into his face as though wanting to find out whether he himself had any secret. She looked, smiled, and went back to the house with a new walk, as though the thought that she was the guardian of a secret had added to her respect for herself. Then she turned and tossed over her shoulder, "But there's no secret about you, Serafim."

She followed the words with her kind, affectionate laugh as though it were a joke, and he laughed too—answering not her words but that kind laugh which made him feel good as it always did.

This good feeling stayed with him for a long time; it went home with him. He moved slowly, quietly, as though carrying a pot of soup, afraid of spilling it.

By his house he saw Romka Kochin. He was standing apprehensively at a respectful distance from the fence, looking at Anfisa and for some reason holding his cheek, his face twisted as though he had toothache, or had eaten something very sour.

Anfisa was washing clothes by the shed. Her firm calves seemed to be bursting out of her boot-shafts. The narrow army skirt was tight over her rounded buttocks—

it looked as though one good slap would resound like a bell. Anfisa worked with brisk efficiency, Romka cleared his throat.

"Anfisa! " he called pleadingly. She ignored him.

"Anfisa! " very meekly.

She turned and blew the hair from her eyes.

"So our fine fellow's here again, large as life! What d'you want? "

"How d'you mean, what do I want? I've come home."

"Oh aye? Go to hell! "

"Don't tempt fate," he said cautiously, not sure what would be best—aggression or diplomacy. "I tell you—I've come home."

"And I need you like a dog needs a fifth leg! Go back where you came from! "

"Drop that daftness—you hear me? " He had decided on aggression.

"Oh aye, you get more comfort with me! But just you mind on: that comfort of yours is gone. I don't want you. I'm a bit particular, I am."

"You addle-pated fool! " Romka exploded. "You mean it? What d'you think—I could do without a woman all that time? Out o' your mind! I'm a man, wi' no woman my blood 'ud have thickened and gone to my head. Don't you know aught? You've had your fun all right, that's sure. But I don't ask because I've got sense and tact. Maybe you slept with the whole division—who knows? "

"Sure I did. And not just a division—an army. My truck was full of men from sergeant to general, there is no comparing you and those men."

"Well, to hell with them," said Romka magnanimously. "I'll forgive you! You do the same and stop playing the innocent. I took care of the house—"

"Many thanks! But I won't let you in all the same."

"I'm your husband, you fool."

"I'll get a divorce."

"You're just a drab! " Romka had finally lost his temper. "Shurka makes you sick, you think she's a bit o' muck, but maybe Shurka—"

"Shut up! At once! " Anfisa ordered. "And don't you talk to me about that Shurka of yours. What I saw—

it'll take me all my life to spit it out. Be off with you, let me alone." She turned her back and continued her washing.

Romka bawled, he threatened, but he went. Frolov looked at her calves, her back, her firm buttocks, took shame for his thoughts and went home to have his dinner—hot water and rusks. He could still see Anfisa through the window. He turned and sat with his back to it, but not for long; he fidgeted on the stool and then turned to face the window again. Her whole body moved with her work, her rounded calves caught the eye. She was certainly attractive, and Frolov felt angry with himself. Just an animal—he could still feel the warm rain of Nastya's smile and there he was eyeing Anfisa. He finished his hot water and went back to the warehouse, away from temptation.

There was not much for him to do. He had a little talk with Soldatka, unloaded some empty packing cases which arrived, and as the light was fading went back home.

Now what? Go to the pictures? But it was an old film showing. He could take a drink of home-distilled, but he didn't feel much like drinking. He went to the club, but today there was no dancing. The accordion player had gone off drinking, and what dancing could you have without him? So Frolov sat on a log swinging his legs, bantered with the girls, laughed, told stories about the war and in general had quite a good time, then went back home by the long route, past Nastya's house. He wanted to look at her house, at least, before going to bed. He liked to take these consolation walks sometimes.

He went quietly into the yard and looked at the window, standing so that he could not be seen from inside. But the room seemed to be empty. He moved closer to the window and then saw grandad threading a needle he could not see. Grandad was rather comical; he would hold his hands wide apart, then move them slowly together and with a sudden, sharp movement bring the hand holding the thread forward as though firing with it, but fail to hit the target and start all over again. Frolov looked for Nastya, did not see her and moved away. But before leaving the yard he glanced into the hen-house—perhaps she was there? No, not there, either. He went towards the gate and suddenly saw her by the shed.

She was standing, leaning against the dark shed, looking at him with a strange, absent gaze, at him yet past him. Frolov knew and hated that look which seemed to be directed somewhere inside herself. At such moments she gave off a chill like a piece of ice. When he saw her like this it seemed to him that she had some sorrow. Yet there was nothing apparent to warrant it, so far as he could see her life was no worse, no sadder, than that of others.

"What's troubling you, Nastya? " Frolov asked, himself troubled, himself conscious of the pain which seemed to be eating into her.

"You here again," she said wearily. "I'm sick of you, Serafim."

No, there was no anger in her voice; as always, she simply said what was in her mind, not troubling herself overmuch if her words hurt or not. And Frolov was not offended.

"I'll go—excuse me," he said gently. "But maybe you'd come for a walk? Why d'you have to stand here as if there was no other thing to do? —As if you were getting ready to dive into a deep pool! Come along! "

"What for? "

"What for? More cheerful, like. You're always alone. Why's that? Haven't you any friends? "

"What's this—a form from the personnel department?"

"No." Frolov sighed; it is difficult to talk to anyone who keeps herself shut and locked against you, with no wish to open the door. "I was only wondering—maybe there's something troubling you? "

"Go your ways, Serafim. I didn't call you here."

Frolov was standing close to her, his face near hers—stoop just a little and he could kiss her. With any other girl he would have done just that, but with this one—! She was different and he was afraid of her. He looked at her lips and his throat went dry.

"What if I kiss you, eh—Nastya? " he said huskily.

"Taking a lot for granted, aren't you? "

He could have ignored it and kissed her, but he didn't—not so much offended as annoyed.

"Time you got married and had a family."

"Yes, it's time," she agreed. "I'm tired of tormenting myself alone."

"Marry me, then," he said with a mirthless smile, "and we'll share the torment. But what torment have you got?"

"What joy, rather. What have I ever seen? Nothing. Only the war, only suffering. I suppose I'm frightened for all my life."

"Just your fancy. It'll pass, that fear. Come for a walk, better."

"You've a lot of wind in your head, Serafim, that's what," she said and went slowly into the house.

A queer girl she is, thought Frolov and made his way home—not by the direct route but along the river, to ease himself of Nastya's melancholy.

It was as lovely as any picture. The sun was setting, on one side the sky was rose-tinted, on the other dark blue, like gathering thunderclouds. The dusk had only touched the river but not yet descended on it, it was like a transparent veil and one could see clearly a long way, right to the farther bank.

Somebody was swimming, blowing out water. Swimming easily, with enjoyment. Frolov recognised Anfisa just as she too saw him.

"It's you, soldier?"

"Well?"

"Where are you off? Come in and bathe."

"I'll do without," said Frolov but climbed down to the river and waited for Anfisa beside her clothes. She swam up, told him to turn his back and dressed in the bushes.

Then she sat beside him on a boulder, wrung out her hair and rhapsodised about the scene and the bathe. Her hair was long and thick, like a horse's mane.

"So you kept it long?" Frolov marvelled.

"I sure did."

"Daft! At the front it was a tommy-gunner farm."

"A what?"

"You're slow. Lice, then."

She laughed.

"We called them tankettes. Kept them out. I don't like short hair. What's a woman with a cropped head?"

"And you're a woman?"

"What else? A man?"

"A soldier."

"And a woman, all the same."

She laughed—a slow, low, languorous laugh. Frolov's eyes went to her knees, round and smooth as apples. He sat a little while, looking away, then rose. "All right, so long."

"Where are you off? Sit a bit. You're the only one of my own kind here. Stay a while."

"Tired of it."

He went, but she overtook him.

The colour had drained from the sky, the river looked cold, the air was thicker, soon it would be dark. They walked in silence. It embarrassed Frolov to have Anfisa walking beside him—they were so close that their elbows touched. He moved farther away.

"Frolov," she said.

"Well?"

"If I ask you something, will you answer?"

"Drop your riddles, tell me what it is."

She flashed a look at him and laughed wryly. He waited for her to ask her question, but she said nothing.

"Where's your question?"

"I've changed my mind."

Now the silence lasted until they reached home.

"Eh, it's true enough," she said at the gate. "Relativity everywhere."

"That nonsense again," Frolov snapped. "A lot of junk. Makes me sick!"

"It isn't junk, it's truth," said Anfisa didactically. "There's relativity everywhere. Among people, and in nature."

"Don't you try to teach me. I've no use for it."

"But it's a law of nature, blockhead!"

"Aye, you've got hold of one end and can't find the rest. Use your brains if you've got any. A person can't be relative to another. There isn't any such law."

He waved her off and went to his own house. But Anfisa wasn't to be put off, she followed him and settled on a stool by the table.

"Why's it like this, Frolov? Times back, before the war, I never seemed to think of things like that, but now I keep on thinking and reasoning things."

"Enough of your blether," he said disgustedly, pulled off his boots and lay down, his feet up on the bed end

to rest them—they were aching. "And what's the good of all that reasoning of yours? Not worth a crocked kopeck. And that relativity—get it out of your head. You can think up daft stuff like that, all you want. Everything that's alive tries to get together, they go in herds, rub up against each other—cows and horses, wolves, foxes and birds—all sorts. And people the same. If you want a law, it's that folks all live together. Get that! And you—with your relativity!"

Anfisa, her elbows on the table, listened to him with a wry smile smoking and exhaling through the open window.

"And that I've seen, too. You're a babe, Frolov. People get together because they're frightened, and when fright's past they're all apart again."

"Bunk!" Frolov was getting angry. "Folks aren't that way. Don't turn it all upside down. Eh, what d'you expect—women, they always stand things on their heads."

"What am I standing on its head? Naught. Relativity's a law of nature. That senior lieutenant, he knew it all, and he wasn't talking bunk, he'd got the proofs of it."

"An intellectual, that senior lieutenant of yours."

"Don't you call him names." Now Anfisa was angry too. "You never knew him, let him alone."

"What do I want with him? I don't need see him to know the sort he was if he talked that way. He'd no understanding of social things, that's what!"

"Why that?"

"Just that. No sense or sight. Laws—you can make up as many as you want, a wagonload of 'em."

"Make up a few, then, if you're so clever!"

"Sure. But I don't need. There's been plenty done it. Take that son-of-a-bitch Hitler, he decided to find a new law of nature—some people are born masters, others slaves. The masters give the orders and the slaves aren't allowed to use their brains. And we know what came of that crackpot idea. There's them as has wanted to separate man from man, that may be, but the real laws draw them together. And you can't split 'em with war or anything else. Get that, blockhead? That's why Hitler couldn't put it over, that people mustn't dare to think. How's that—not think? Of course, people—they're weak

in their bodies, but not in their minds, no. You can drain a man of blood, cut off his arms and legs, shut him up in a concentration camp, even force him down on his knees, but you can't stop him thinking his own way. And on his knees, he'll still think as he wants. Like as if he'd given way with his body, but his brain—the wheels were still going round. He can submit, like, but them wheels go round all the same. That's your law of nature, the real one. And that's why folks keep on going forward and forward, right from the very beginning they've been doing it."

"It's my head that's going round with all your talk, Frolov," said Anfisa wearily. "But all the same, you can say what you like, but one person's relative to another."

Frolov let out a sound of disgust, his face crimson with anger.

"Fool! "

"No, I'm not a fool, Frolov," she said sadly. "You say they're not relative, you made a song of your laws and went soaring up in the clouds, but I look at you and I've different thoughts."

"And what are your different thoughts? "

"If you'd come down to earth you could have a bit of pity for me; take Romka and me, isn't that relativity? "

Frolov thought, then nodded.

"Yes, there—I agree, it's all relative. But dreams don't always come true. That's the way dreams are, a sort of something not of this earth."

"There you are, you see—so I'm right." Anfisa laughed with condescension. "Eh, man of laws! Well, good night."

With that she went. Frolov turned from side to side on the bed, then rose, picked up with finger and thumb the cigarette butt Anfisa had left in a flower pot and threw it out of the window as far as he could, by the fence, to get rid of the man-woman smell of her. A woman, indeed—naught of a woman about her but her bottom.

In the morning he was jerked awake by bawling in the next-door yard. It was Romka, drunk—either he'd already got his skinful or he hadn't dried out from last night. He was trying to break in, yelling that Anfisa had

no right to drive her husband out into the street, half the house was his anyway. The door opened and Anfisa appeared in a dark-blue nightdress, barefooted, dishevelled, wrathful. She did not scream at him, she just looked at him, arms akimbo, but it was such a look that Romka fell back, suddenly sheepish.

"You'll see your ears before you see my house. Got some fine ideas! Clear out and sleep it off! "

"Who d'you think you are? Giving orders! A bit o' muck! That's what. A naught! Just look at her, the hero from the front! Half this house is mine. And I'm going to live here. In my own house! "

"You've no house here. Nor half nor a quarter. My grandad built this house, and you—you're just an off-come! Go to your Shurka and live with her! "

"Don't you order me about! " Romka bawled. "If you won't let me in wi' good will, I'll go to court! And they'll make you! It was me who looked after the house when you were away whoring with half the army! "

"Wha-a-at? " Anfisa made for him.

He jumped back, saw a pitchfork leaning against the henhouse, snatched it up and with face distorted advanced on Anfisa. She fell back but the house door was shut. It opened outwards, to get in she would have to turn her back, just for a second, on Romka, but she did not have that second, he was coming at her, stooping, the fork before him. Anfisa pressed her back against the door.

Frolov saw it looked bad and ran out in his underpants. But Romka had the fork raised, another instant and he would drive it at Anfisa, pin her to the door.

"Well, strike, you ruffian—strike! " she cried and moved forward towards the sharp prongs.

"I'll kill you! All the same I'll kill you! " howled Romka, suddenly sobered, threw down the fork and collapsed on the porch steps.

Anfisa stood over him, eyes closed. Gradually she came to herself.

"Snot-nose," she said with dull scorn. "Dirty rag! "

She turned and went in. Frolov climbed over the fence, picked up the fork and tossed it into the back of the shed, out of harm's way. Romka stared at him with unseeing eyes, shaking.

"Hi, Frolov," Anfisa called through the window. "Give him a feel, has he got wet pants? "

Romka started up as though flicked with a whip. But Frolov held him.

"I'll show her, the snake, I'll show her," Romka mumbled, struggling to get away.

"Let him go," said Anfisa.

She came out onto the porch. She was dressed now and carried her pack.

"Well, show me! You keep saying you will but you don't do naught. So goodbye, my fine fellow. I'm off. Take the house, your kingdom! To hell with it! At the front people lost their lives and this—rubbish, keep it, choke on it! Anyway, it stinks of your filth. I've got my arms and legs, I'll manage."

"Anfisa, bide a bit, get your wits back, quiet down." Romka sounded pitiful now.

"Me? I'm quiet enough. You've got what you wanted and more, I'm leaving you the whole place. Take it and be glad." With that she went.

Anfisa rented a room close to the factory and lived on her own. She got work in the dye shop. Romka again reigned alone in the house. But his kingdom was dull and depressing. No women came to him now. He drank only rarely. When he did he would lounge about the yard singing drearily, "It's early yet to die, there's work to do at home." Sometimes in the evening he would drop in on Frolov and sit silently, smoking and sighing.

Frolov's own life flowed on with nothing especial happening, except that Soldatka was giving him quite a spot of bother. She was in a romantic period, let Frolov be just a little careless and she was off, searching the whole neighbourhood for a mate. The law of life was driving her, because it is a function of all living creatures to reproduce their kind. But there was no mate to be found and Soldatka languished in her unsatisfied desire for motherhood. Once he spent two days looking for her and found her at last far from the settlement, in an abandoned kolkhoz stable where the very smell of horses had long ago vanished. The war had cut down not only humans, it had thinned the horse tribe too. Another time he found her in an oatfield with the ancient factory gelding.

"You're a stupid female," said Frolov as he led her home. "There's no mate for you in all the district, and it's no good looking. So why plague yourself and me too for naught? There's none, you'll just have to be alone and you'd better understand it."

Soldatka listened and tossed her head. There's nothing more boring than listening to a sermon and nothing more useless than preaching one; she was tired of Frolov's didacticism, she pushed her muzzle into his back, playful and annoyed at once.

"Stop fooling," said Frolov. "Old as you are, and acting up like a kid."

He looked at her with good-humoured reproach. But he could never hold out under her look. He felt ashamed for some reason, as though he met the eyes not of a beast without the power of reason, but of some wise creature that suffered and understood everything. Frolov was certain that a horse, although not a human being, was still not a senseless beast, it could see all that was good and bad in you, and it was probably because of this that unconsciously, without realisation, he somehow tried to conciliate her.

He respected Soldatka and he knew that although her opinion of him might be not altogether flattering, she too respected him. He did not understand where an animal could get this almost human sense of respect, one that not every person possessed, because in some it begins and ends in respect for oneself only.

Frolov sometimes liked to ponder over the thought that to establish order on earth little was really needed—only to teach people first and foremost to respect and understand one another. Then there would be no selfishness or deceit, there would be no fighting, killing, and most important, there would be no more war, to the deepest hell with it! Of course, Frolov was not so foolish as not to realise the naiveté of his thoughts. But letting them flow along these lines he felt a gentle warmth inside him, as though he were telling children a fairy-tale with a happy ending. That's the Russian nature—all fairy-tales have to end happily. This good ending Russians have always expected. Whatever might happen, the good ending was the crown of everything.

Once a month, sometimes twice, Frolov had to go to the district centre to get various materials. It wasn't very

close, but not too far, either--three hours by train or car.

This district centre was not large, just a dusty little town not much bigger than the settlement where he lived. But as a district centre it possessed what a mere settlement could not have—offices, superior officials who could be gracious or ungracious with respect to Frolov's warehouse. Sometimes all the success of his efforts depended on the mood not of the chief official but of a secondary one. These secondary officials often swing more power than the very highest bosses.

The man in charge of stores was thin, hoarse-voiced, in a greasy dark-blue tunic. He poked among his teeth with a match as he talked and he used the familiar "thou" form. Frolov had his quirks of character: he didn't like to be addressed as "thou" by somebody to whom he could not reply in kind owing to his subordinate position.

To gain the favour of the secondary official he ought to smile, to inquire about his wife and children. It would do no harm, too, to crack a bottle and chew the rag a bit each time he came. Frolov would have been glad to do all this, but he hadn't the knack, the front had been a school where one of the lessons had been: don't lie, you won't escape death by pretending.

That may have been why the secondary official had no great love for Frolov, played cat-and-mouse with him, sent him off to a tertiary official, who sent him on to someone else. He did get what he needed in the end, but it cost him much more effort than it cost others who were better diplomats and strategists. A soldier ought to understand strategy. He'd known all about it at the front, but in peacetime conditions his wartime strategy got him nowhere.

One day, leaving a fourth-rate official in the worst of moods, he suddenly, to his surprise, met Nastya. She had been to the finance office, had finished her business there and was now free. Frolov walked along beside her and since it was dinner-time and there were still some hours before the train would leave, invited her to a restaurant opened recently near the station. At first Nastya was alarmed and slightly offended, she had never been in restaurants and wasn't the kind of girl who went with

men to such places. But Frolov patiently explained that she'd got the wrong idea, there was nothing wrong about sitting in a restaurant, anyone had the right to do it, man or woman, and there was certainly nothing compromising about it. For a while Nastya stood out obstinately, but Frolov felt that she was weakening and pressed home the attack. Hunger, too, is a powerful argument, and Nastya was very hungry: in the morning she had snatched up a piece of bread, and had had nothing since. So her hunger was Frolov's ally, and with its aid he managed to overcome her resistance.

The place he entered with Nastya was rather like a third-class railway smoker. He felt some inward tremors, afraid that Nastya would not want to stay in such a place, but she was evidently under the spell of the word "restaurant" and noticed nothing of the dirty tablecloths, the smoke or the kitchen smells. To her simple soul a "restaurant" must be something very special.

Frolov led her to a table some distance from the door, out of the draught and ensuring a slight degree of privacy. The choice on the menu was not great—much the same as in an ordinary canteen, with the one difference: ration cards were not needed, and the prices were threefold.

He ordered three hundred grams of vodka, a bottle of lemonade, rissoles with macaroni, eight chocolates and at Nastya's request the whole portion of bread permitted so that she could take what was left home to her grandfather. The price was horrifying, but fortunately he had plenty of money with him; he had thought to buy himself a civvy overcoat.

A gramophone played records of Klavdia Shulzhenko—*The Blue Kerchief* and others. Drunks moved vaguely through the smoke. Nastya sat, her hands hidden beneath the table, eyes lowered—very shy.

Frolov pushed the rissoles towards her and asked, "Mustard?"

"Yes, please." She blushed—she simply couldn't conquer her shyness.

"Chin up," said Frolov, "Relax!" He laid a spoonful of mustard on the side of her plate—surprisingly, but he knew how to be attentive—and then poured out the vodka.

"I don't drink, really," said Nastya uncertainly, "but since we're here—"

"That's right! " cried Frolov. "Since we're here—" and clinked his glass quickly against hers, giving her no time for hesitation.

They drank.

The vodka was strong, real snake-poison, it flew to the head of even such a seasoned drinker as Frolov, and almost stunned Nastya; it took her some moments to come to herself, laughing aimlessly, forgetful of her shyness. Frolov urged her to eat something; she took a piece of rissole and looked about her.

"Really, it isn't at all bad here," she said approvingly.

"Uhuh," said Frolov, carefully moving his own rissole onto her plate.

"But what about you? "

"Go on, I've eaten. We can order more. Eat it, don't be shy."

"I'm not, I'll just break off a little bit, no more. You know, Serafim, it's really very nice here. And the pictures! Like an art gallery! There's one I like awf'ly, it's lovely," and she pointed to one in a far corner of bears in a wood.

"Yes, it's fine," Frolov agreed.

"And the artist—you know his name? "

Frolov knew, but to please Nastya said he'd no idea.

"Shishkin! " she announced happily.

"That's right. I remember now. He painted a lot of landscapes."

"I like pictures showing nature," said Nastya. "There was one being sold at the market once—a stream, and water lilies. And a beautiful frame, too. I'd have bought it, but it cost too much."

"It's always worth it for anything beautiful. What's money? Flies away like pigeons, but something beautiful—you've always got it."

"Uhuh. I never grudge it for beauty. You can't live with nothing to please your eyes. I bought a tapestry for the wall—embroidered, you know, on the right there's a deer, running, and on the left a castle on a hill, and way back the sky and birds. Oh, it's lovely, I can't tell you how lovely! "

So they chatted, glad to find the talk flowing so easily, and not just foolish babble, but on a lofty level. As Frolov talked he admired Nastya, her smile, the little finger which she held poised as she ate—so genteel. He was happy, sitting beside his Magic Firebird, seeing the kindness in her eyes, watching her bite off bits of chocolate. For the first time he saw an awakening interest in himself. And that sense of inferiority which he usually felt beside her had vanished; on the contrary, he actually felt a certain superiority, because after all, he had been about and seen the world.

He poured out the last of the vodka.

"Nastya...."

"Well? "

"I do like you, the way you are today. Usually you seem sort of sorrowful. As though you'd no joy in life."

"The same old thing again. I haven't any sorrow. But what's there in life to be so pleased about? Maybe you enjoy life, well, I don't. There's nothing in a life like this."

"What d'you mean, nothing? "

"Nothing, that's all. Why should folks run about and fuss like ants, if some fine day a war'll come and smash everything up? "

Frolov's spirits were dashed.

"You've just taken it into your head. There won't be any more war, this was the last. Or if there is—well, do we have to sit shaking and shivering? To hell with it! Bosh! Let's drink! "

"Let's! " Nastya agreed without hesitation.

They drank, looking at one another. Frolov took courage.

"I'll be coming again next week. What if we meet—eh? And sit a while here? "

"Look at you, now," she said coquettishly. "Taken a fancy for it! "

"Uhuh. Well—what about it? "

"We'll see. You'll be getting above yourself. Or—maybe I should arrange it so that they send me here with the balance sheet."

"Yes, do that. I haven't really anything much to do here. I'll order roofing metal, and we'll have the whole day to enjoy. Well? "

"I'll see how you behave yourself." She threatened him with a finger and laughed. And the look she gave him—for a moment his breath caught with joy. She was so beautiful and he loved her more than ever, a love too great for this earth. She laughed and he laughed too, growing utterly foolish from joy. He called the waitress and told her to bring a slab of chocolate.

"Serafim! I want you to do something for me. Will you?"

"Of course, anything you want."

"Our roof's all rusty and rotting. It'll be letting in the rain when it starts. You talked of roofing metal. Bring me two sheets—will you?"

Frolov looked away, taken aback by such a request.

"You really mean it?"

"Why, yes, of course," she said with that happy simplicity which always left Frolov weak. "You don't know how the wet came in last spring. Grandad patched the roof, but that doesn't last long. Just two sheets, we don't need any more. Well—will you?"

Frolov badly wanted to do as she asked. Everything in him wanted it, so as to put the new accord on a firm footing. But—this he could not do, even to gain her love.

"I can't," he said apologetically. "If it was mine I'd like naught better. But this way—no, I can't. Forgive me."

She looked at him in frank amazement; she wasn't sure if he were joking or serious.

"You said—anything I wanted. And now—"

"But it isn't mine—can't you understand?"

No, she couldn't.

"And then you say you love me." She spoke with scorn. "You're all the same. Your love's naught but words. And then you want me to love you."

"Does love just mean what you can get out of it?" Frolov asked gloomily. "If it's that, then what sort of love is it? I've never stolen in all my life."

"Stealing—nonsense, just two sheets and all this talk! If you don't want to do it then say so. The way you talk, I'm no better than a thief myself. Yesterday I took a bucket of coal home from the bath-house. I take it when I need it, when it's necessary." She gave him a

lofty look, sure in the irrefutability of her claim. "So your way, I'm a thief?"

She laughed challengingly. But Frolov did not join in, he sighed and said softly, "Looks like it."

This she had not expected, she felt herself completely justified in what she did. How else should you live, that's what life was like, the only way you could manage. Frolov's words were like a blow. She flushed crimson and tears rose to her eyes. She sat blinking, looking scared and pitiful.

"Thank you kindly!" she cried at last. "I'll remember the treat you've stood me long enough. Oh, I won't forget it. Go and find yourself one that's clean, and not a thief!"

Haughtily she stalked towards the door. Perhaps she expected Frolov to call her because in spite of her high indignation she walked slowly. But he did not call, although he was very sorry for her.

He ordered another hundred-and-fifty grams, knocked it back in one gulp, picked up the remnants of bread and chocolates, wrapped them in a piece of newspaper and left, outwardly just like everyone else, even smiling slightly, but inwardly crying like a child.

Why that inward weeping? Not because he was drunk or regretted having offended Nastya. No, it wasn't only that. He suffered and wept inwardly because of a discovery he had made.

God, he thought, there just isn't any Magic Firebird, it's just make-up! Something folks have thought up to comfort themselves and soothe children. There isn't any! A trick of the eye, mist, dreams—naught else! You can't live with an empty heart so they make something up, push it in like filling a pack with playthings. With some it's a woman, others it's money, others again it's power, even just a bit of it to lift them up above others. And none of those are what matters, not riches nor power nor a woman, there's more than that, the Magic Firebird can fly away but the main thing always stops with a person.

What that main thing was he didn't know, he only knew it lay in something else, not in indulging yourself.

Frolov did not venture to look for Nastya, he didn't even know if she would go back by train or get a lift on some lorry going her way.

He himself went by train. It was crowded. At first all rushed to secure places, pushing each other, crushing the children, cursing, but then when the train started they settled down like grain in a pot which looks ready to spill over, but after a good shake it all packs in; one could even add some more.

It was very stuffy, although windows were opened to make a draught. But Frolov noticed nothing, he was too upset over his quarrel with Nastya. He felt sad and bitter and injured. He was sorry for himself with his ill luck in love, but he was sorry for Nastya, too, imagining how despondent she must be feeling in her loneliness.

The wheels thudded, the engine whistled, telegraph wires rose and fell—it seemed very long to Frolov, that three-hour journey. He sank into melancholy thoughts, hearing yet not hearing the talk, seeing yet not seeing what went on in the coach.

A bearded old man sat beside him, and an old woman opposite. They were both lean and dried-up, but tough as an aspen twig in autumn—bend it all you will, you can't break it. The old man looked at the old woman, and she at him, but neither spoke a word, they just sat and looked. Then they got tired of looking at each other, like gazing into a mirror, and the old man spoke in a soft whisper.

"Dunya, ye haven't got old, a marvel, it is."

"Nay, now, ha' done with your foolish talk," she said, flattered.

"It's God's truth, well, mebbe just a mite. Ye're just the way ye were. That's why I recognised you at once."

"But you, Vasenka, ye've got real settled," the old woman said tenderly, "time was ye were like John the Baptist, now ye're just like the icon of Nicholas the Miracle-Worker."

"Eh! " he grunted. "It'll be forty years, nigh enough, from the time I met ye, or I'd show ye Nicholas's miracles." He bent closer to her and added under his breath, "And I'm none so powerless now, either!"

The old woman glanced quickly from side to side, shook her fist at him and turned away.

A man in an army greatcoat with a wooden stump for one leg entered the coach and shouted merrily.

"Good friends, understand and pity my plight! I can do aught you want, but one thing I can't—I can't keep away from the drink. It's ashamed I am to be telling you, good friends, I'm no good, a miserable alcoholic, rot and corruption in mankind. Don't despise me because I despise myself enough, but give a poor drunken soldier something to sober up on."

There was general laughter and everyone tossed coins into the cap he held. Frolov too gave him some small change without counting it. Then at another stop a pack of children burst in, dirty and ragged, followed by a woman with an ageless face—young or old, one couldn't tell.

"Good people, help unfortunates who've been burned out," she said, and sent the children round to collect kopecks while she sat down on a sack in the gangway, just beside Frolov's seat, and sighed. "Aye, we travel and travel, but when we'll get there...."

"D'ye have far to go?" the old woman asked.

"Aye, a long, long way. To Mother Volga. To Cheboksary."

"Is that a town? Wi' such a queer name?"

"A Chuvash town," she explained. "We aren't Russian, we're Chuvash. We lived in Byelorussia, but we lost our father, we suffered a lot from that Hitler, a curse on him for all eternity, and now a new grief, the house burned down and we lost all we had."

The children brought coins in sweaty hands and gave them to her. She knotted them in a cloth and slipped it down under the front of her clothes.

"Oh, God in Heaven," she cried suddenly. "Where's Sashenka? Oh! Sashenka's lost!"

"He isn't lost at all," said a little girl of about eight with a sly face. "He's out on the platform at the back, smoking."

It was true. On the platform a thin boy with a sunflower-yellow head was drawing on a cigarette. The woman rushed at him, snatched away the cigarette, grasped him by the scruff of the neck and pushed him into the coach. A little Tom Thumb raised his head behind the sack on which the woman had been sitting. A huge cap almost extinguished him and a thin trickle ran down from his nose. He wiped it away with his hand.

"Ye're a tattle-tale, Tatka. I'll tell on you, how you and Kolka were kissing." That brought a general burst of laughter.

"How many have you?" Frolov asked the woman.

"There's but one of my own. That one."

"Uhuh, I'm ma's," Tom Thumb affirmed.

"And them—I'm their auntie, they're my sister's, orphans. And our dad was lost in the war, too. We've none other of our own left, we're all alone."

Frolov remembered the bread and chocolate in the newspaper, unwrapped it and divided it up evenly among the children. He gave the woman a piece of chocolate, too, but she did not eat it, she wrapped it in a piece of paper.

At last they came to Frolov's station. The corridor was crowded, with noisy jostling. Inspectors appeared looking for people without tickets. Frolov handed his over, went out onto the platform and gasped. Through a crack in the doors he saw Nastya on the platform of the next coach. She saw him, too, turned her back and pushed her way out of his sight.

The train moved slowly past familiar houses, past places which if not yet fully his own, were still something he had got attached to. There was Nastya's house with some sort of dark-blue cloth hanging on a line, like a flag; it slid past and disappeared, and Frolov remembered his first arrival, remembered how he had seen that house from the platform, how he had jumped off the moving train, to keep his dream. As he remembered it he felt very lonely, agitated by the implacable thought that he had let his heart rule him, he had not possessed the strength or the desire to break away from the one whom he had seen as his Magic Firebird. Common sense told him: Break away, this young lady isn't for you! But his heart spoke differently, it melted like a piece of sugar in boiling water.

No, Frolov didn't feel he was to blame, but all the same when he saw her—lonely, offended, hurt, far too proud, hurrying away from the station as though in haste to hide from his eyes, he again felt—not so much guilt, as pity. He might even have followed her. But fortunately he was prevented by chance, and thanks to that chance involuntarily showed a firmness which he was far from feeling.

This chance was seeing the inspectors put off the train the whole family travelling to Cheboksary. The children one by one jumped obediently down to the platform. They were evidently quite used to this procedure, they didn't cry or protest, they were even laughing as though it was some delightful game. That made the inspectors, two men in black greatcoats, angry. Though why they should be angry they probably could not themselves have said. The last to jump down was Tom Thumb; then the locomotive whistled shrilly, the train jerked, clanged its buffers and went its way letting out a plume of black smoke, like a child's drawing.

"Hullo!" said Frolov. "Arrived?"

"Uhuh," said Tom Thumb and spat dashingly over his shoulder.

"Not bad," Frolov praised him. "Take you long to learn it?"

"Uhuh."

"Will you teach me?"

"Uhuh."

"What do they call you?"

"Who?"

"You."

"Me? I'm Senha."

"What?"

"Senha."

"So that's it! A fine name. Well, now we're acquainted, Senka?"

"No, not Senka, Senha."

"You've got me all mixed up, Zhenka, is it?"

"Uhuh." Zhenka pushed his little finger as far up his nose as it would go. "And she's Tatka. Tatka-fatka, snivelling snotka!"

"Learn to talk properly first," said Tatka. "Or I'll tell on you, how you hid a five-kopeck."

"I'll give you tell!" Zhenka shook his fist at her. Frolov saw the woman settling her sack under a lean-to, remembered that there would be no train until tomorrow, and suddenly had the happy idea of taking them home with him. Let them wash and rest, sleep through the night, there'd be room enough for them all. It would be better for them, and not at all bad for himself, it would distract him from his despondency. Just what a

happy idea it was he did not at once realise, it came to him only later, during the night.

Dusk was falling by the time he got them home, and by the time they had had supper (he opened his last tin of meat, kept for emergencies), washed and settled down for the night, it was quite dark. He settled them anywhere and everywhere, some with the old woman, some on the stove, some on his own bed, while he lay on the floor, army style, wrapped in his greatcoat, which also served for a pillow.

As usual he slept soundly, but wakened at dawn and lay in the half-darkness, drowsily, hearing his guests breathing and snuffling.

Zhenka slipped down from the bed and swaying, eyes still shut, made for the door. He whined softly, like a puppy, driven by need. Frolov took hold of his thin, fragile shoulders and led him out onto the porch. He held him for fear he fall in his drowsiness while he let out a thin stream that rang against something metallic—a spade, perhaps—with the soft whine of a passing bullet.

"Finished?" Frolov asked when he heard nothing more.

Zhenka moaned something and his warm soft little body sagged against Frolov, who picked him up and carried him inside. Zhenka lay limply in his arms, head falling back, legs dangling. He smelt of sweat, warmth and something else—milk, or wheat, or the warm earth, or perhaps a tree just before it puts out its first leaves. Frolov could not be sure just what that sweet smell was, he only felt it and knew it was something newly-created, holy. He kissed the soft cheek, kissed the warm little body, and laid it back on the bed. Let him enjoy sweet dreams.

He went out onto the porch and sat down, his back against the door, watching the sky grow paler. This was the moment when he knew that of all happy ideas he had ever had, the happiest had been to bring these children home with him.

In general, one needs from time to time to touch something holy, something defenceless, helpless. Not only to feel one's own weakness, but to remember one's strength. Conscious of his weakness, a person becomes more kindly, and kindliness is the strength of the heart.

Sitting on the porch, leaning against the door, Frolov dozed a little, was wakened by the cock's crowing, lighted a cigarette, and listened to the distant locomotive whistles. It was a strange thing—in all the district, for fifty or more kilometres, there were no trains at night, yet the whistles called. The railway, even empty, gave out its accustomed sounds and lived, although lifeless. This mysterious call at dawn, from some unknown source, born of nothing, of emptiness, was enticing and challenging.

After some hours, at ten-thirty by the time-table, a real train would come to carry away these guests of Frolov's, and the smoke from the engine would be like a black funeral banner. They would go and he would be left here to crave Nastya's love. As before he would live lonely, with no care or affection. No, it was all wrong, that one person should hold another on a leash like a dog, with no need for it! It was all wrong that the world was made that way. Perhaps Frolov too would like to go away somewhere, but he stopped here in this place and waited for something. A miracle? But miracles don't happen.

Sorry for himself, angry with himself, he stamped out the cigarette end and went down to the river to fish.

He managed to get everything done while his guests were still asleep; he caught several crucians, dug potatoes in granny's kitchen garden, and lighted the summer stove out in the yard.

Yellow-headed Sashka came out to help him, washed the potatoes and brought up wood for the fire.

"Give me something to smoke, uncle," he begged.

"A fine smoker! The milk hasn't dried on your mouth."

"It's dried and I've smoked a long time. You can't reform me. I've drunk home-distilled, too. That's nasty stuff. But smoking—it's fine. Gimme."

Frolov sighed and tossed over his pouch.

"Were you in the tanks?"

"No, why? Infantry."

"The king of the field!" said Sashka with no particular respect. "But my dad was in the tanks. And he burned to death in a tank. Did you ever see a tank burning?"

"I saw it all."

"Me too. Like a haystack—uh! Up it blazes. And black smoke like pitch. Awful! Have you any children?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"I'm not married."

"You ought to get married. It's bad, alone, with no woman of your own."

"All right, I'll get married," Frolov promised.

Sashka drew in smoke, let it out and after thinking, spoke in a tone of concern about Frolov's future.

"You ought to marry Auntie Marusya, she's a good housewife."

On the porch somebody laughed. Frolov turned, saw Auntie Marusya and flushed with embarrassment.

"Making a match?" she asked gaily.

It wasn't so much that Frolov didn't recognise yesterday's weary, drained woman of no age; but now he marvelled at her youth and even beauty, which he had never noticed the previous day. She had deep black eyes, full lips and round cheeks with a faint down on the cheekbones.

Well, he thought as he looked away, after all, I could. I could feed her and the children, the whole pack of them. I've got all my arms and legs, and my wits are in their place.

He liked her, all right. He watched her briskly washing the children by the well, then she washed herself, and in her freshened face her eyes were brighter and she was very good-looking indeed.

While the children were dealing with the fish and potatoes, Frolov went off for bread. The shop was quite a distance away, one bus stop, nearly a kilometre. He managed to get his ration for three days without queuing, to supply his guests on their way, and bought some sweets with fruit filling; when he got back it was time to go to the station.

He felt melancholy, just as though he were sending somebody of his own off on a long journey and would never see them again. They sat down for a moment before leaving as the custom is, then set off. They passed through the gate into the street, and suddenly he had

another happy inspiration. He even felt ashamed because he had not thought of it before.

Frolov told them to go on and ran back to the house. He had decided to complete his assistance by enabling them to go straight to Cheboksary with no further trouble, by the shortest route. Easy enough, just buy them all tickets. He still had three hundred rubles, just the right amount, and he'd get by all right until payday. If you thought of it, three hundred wasn't so much, he'd left nearly half that amount in the restaurant the previous evening.

Frolov took out his money and hurried to overtake his guests.

He walked along the street with them like the head of a good family, holding Zhenka's and Tatka's hands while they snuggled close to him as though they were his own; they had missed a father's kindness. And alongside walked Marusya like a wife. A thoroughbred countrywoman, with a finely carved face like those on icons, a firm body, abundant breasts—made for the land and the home. She needed a man of her own kind, well-built, sturdily put together. Eh, there by free Mother Volga Frolov would have had good food, regained all his strength and with the winds blowing all the wartime spirit out of him he would have become a peace-time citizen, strong as a rock.

So Frolov marched along the street like the head of a fine family, eyeing Maria, melting from the warmth of childish hands in his, answering their chatter and laughter, with side glances, proud that other people would be looking at him and wondering where the stores manager was going and who he'd got with him.

He wasn't going so very far, after all, only to the station. It was all a game of make-believe, a trick of dreams, something for sighing and heartache. Maria would leave with her brood and by the free Volga would soon forget all about Frolov as she forgot the dust of the journey.

The train would leave in half an hour—not so very long, yet the time seemed long to Frolov because now he didn't know what to talk about to Maria. Nor, for that matter, did she. They had already said all there was to be said in words, and now another talk began, with eyes.

And this eye-talk is the most difficult, and the most exciting, because much may be concealed behind words, but there is no concealing anything in looks, they can never lie.

"If you're ever in our parts come to us, we'll be right glad," said Maria.

"I'd hardly be that way, it's a long road," Frolov answered, but without his will his eyes suddenly said something very different—it wasn't the distance that mattered, but whether if he was wanted there by at least one kindly soul.

"It isn't that long, if you go direct and with no bother," said Maria, while her eyes cried that he would surely be wanted there—that is, if that kindly soul was wanted by him.

"I'll write down the address. After all, you never know," said Frolov with studied casualness, but Maria understood and answered in the same tone.

"Uhuh, write it down, just in case. We aren't in Cheboksary itself, we're in a village across the river. We haven't many houses, there's pine woods all round and lakes, and such a mort o' fish, you'd never think. I grew up there, and that's where their grandad lived, my own dad Andrian Nikolayevich, he died a bit ago. The house is empty and none to look after it. So we're going there, we're all alone now."

"So you're Maria Andrianovna?"

"Yes."

"A pretty name." His eyes caressed her. The caress embarrassed her, and her embarrassment made him feel awkward, too. So they turned away from each other and stood, hardly breathing, then Frolov went to buy the tickets.

He took numbered places to the regional town where they would change to a direct train. The rest of the money he pushed into Maria's startled hand. She protested at this extra generosity, but saw that it hurt him and accepted the gift with thanks.

The train came in and there was noise and jostling as people made for the coaches. Frolov kissed the children and lifted them onto the platform, then took Maria's hand to help her up the steps as though she were a fine lady.

The train started. Frolov walked beside the coach waving to the children crowded round the window, he looked for Maria over their heads but did not see her. All he could see was a vague flicker of her head-kerchief; she was trying to push in among the children but they didn't understand and kept their noses jammed firmly against the glass. The train began to pick up speed and Frolov quickened his pace, and waved, and looked for Maria Andrianovna and could still see only her kerchief, not her face. But right at the end of the platform when he could go no farther she at last pushed through to the window. He saw her face and quietened.

He waited until the whole train had passed, watched it vanish into the distance, then crossed the line and went through the fields, to the forest. He wandered aimlessly, he just felt he'd like to go to the woods, so he wandered without thought or purpose, more like a carefree boy enjoying the butterflies, the grass and small insects than a man with a job to do.

There was something Frolov had noticed at the front. Sometimes in a lull in the fighting, when the tense anticipation of battle and the fear of death brought a chill to the soul, that mortal fear could disappear and his palms would start to itch, a burning itch that would not go. His fingertips were congested with blood, it throbbed beneath the skin; his fingers itched too, but no rubbing would take that itch away. It was like a sickness, but a special kind of sickness and he learned to get rid of it by giving those hands some sort of work to do. He realised that it was the demand of his hands themselves, weary of the work of war, of killing and destroying. They demanded different, peaceful work. So then he would make lighters out of cartridge cases or mend boots. But the most soothing work, in which he forgot everything else, was digging the ground. In some small village where they spent one day, not more, he revelled in taking a spade to an abandoned orchard or vegetable plot. One might have thought that whatever else was lacking, a soldier certainly got enough digging to do. But there is digging *and* digging. To dig a trench or to dig a garden—those are two very different things. The first is evil work, the second is a joy, a distraction from thoughts of war.

That itch in his fingers sometimes bothered Frolov because as he saw it the work in the warehouse was no real work, just a bureaucratic job people had dreamed up. When troublesome thoughts nagged at him or he was sick of the warehouse, he would take a scythe into the woods. He was allowed to mow the glades because of the horse Soldatka.

This work close to the earth was clean and felt right, it held goodness and truth. Soldatka grazed while he mowed the tall grass under a lofty sky with its hot sun, all alone in the whole world. And longing and joy filled him. Russia, my land, he thought, wiping the sweat from his face and gazing into far distance. How can I be living and you getting no good from me? Had he been a story-teller he would have made up a fairy-tale about his land; had he been able to paint he would have made a picture of its early-morning beauty; had he been a tiller of the soil he would have cast seed to fertilise it. But he was nothing, just a man who lived without even giving the world a child in his own image. A fool, a dolt, a warehouse rat!

He must have a weak character. That love for Nastya, so senseless, it tormented him with its humiliation, yet he could not tear himself from her. He no longer wanted to love her, it weighed him down, this one-sided arid love, but pity overcame him. Actually, it was compassion which now made up a great part of his feeling for Nastya. Had he only loved her, nothing more, it wouldn't have been so bad. But he pitied her, and that was the whole trouble. Compassion is stronger than love and all other feelings.

But for what cause should he be sorry for Nastya? None. She had no particular trouble, no misfortune, yet he felt sharp pangs of pity for her. But for that matter, does anyone know why he feels compassion for anything—a cat, a dog, a tree, a blade of grass? He cannot know. Because of its frailty, probably. Without compassion a man is no man. And there can be no Russian completely lacking in it.

In addition, Frolov blamed himself for refusing Nastya's request for roofing metal that time in the restaurant. She had had her point of view, but he had not been able to understand it. Yet he knew that he would

act the same way again—there were things he was quite simply incapable of doing.

His was a melancholy, depressing life in those days. And to make things worse, the rains began.

They started suddenly, as though in one single dark night the place had dropped down into a wet, slippery underworld. The air was chilly. Taut threads of rain, bending under pressure of the wind, struck against each other, ringing like icicles. Roads, fences, roofs, trees gleamed wetly, pockmarked with puddles and runlets.

The weather was so miserable that even Soldatka stood despondently in her shed, and no longer met Frolov with a gay whinny when he came to feed her. She looked at him with sagacious, devoted eyes like a dog and laid her ageing head on his shoulder. If he harnessed her she submissively did her duty, hauling heavy loads along the muddy streets. The rain dug into her hide like sharp icicles that stuck there like splinters. When it really got to be too much for her she would stop, sigh, and after a rest, drag on again. But later, her work finished, she would stand with legs spread and head hanging, drying off in a corner of the warehouse. It took hours for the last of the rain to drain away from her. Steam rose from her hide, so that she stood in a white cloud like an equine god.

Frolov himself was so waterlogged that he felt swollen. His clothes were heavy and stiff. A pood of mud clung to each boot. His wounded arm ached, as it always did in the damp; even in his sleep it troubled him. Going to work by bus in the mornings was anything but pleasant. The damp bus smelling of sweat and other human odours barely crawled. Among the sacks and baskets, the grunts and groans, the curses, grins and jostling, Nastya in her crushed hat, wet and drooping like a mushroom, aroused in Frolov a strange mingling of vexation, pity and something like shame. Leaving the bus, she opened her umbrella and made her way through the pools of water, slipping, moving awkwardly, while Frolov followed and suffered for her. It was only now, during those many days of rain, in this wretched weather, that he realised the cause of Nastya's unhappiness: consciously or unconsciously, she tried to separate herself off from other people, she was bored when she was with them but

without them, too, life had little interest, so she was like a swimmer unable to land on either bank.

In the evenings Frolov sat at home quite alone. He was so bored with it, so much at a loose end that he spent three rubles on a paperback at the station kiosk, a story about the fighting in 1919. Owing to the war, he could hardly remember when he had last read novels. Now his brain had coarsened; he was reading mechanically, his mind taking no part in the process; books made him drowsy and he fell into sleep as into a deep hole.

Sometimes the rain stopped for a few days, only to start again with renewed force. On one of these interim days when the rain had died off into a chilly drizzle, Soldatka disappeared. Gone off to look for a mate again, Frolov thought angrily. In the bad weather all sorts of work had piled up, and now, when the rain had practically stopped and he could deliver things which had been held up, his transport had gone off, if you please, in search of romance. He hoped she would come back in the evening or at least in the morning. But there was no sign of her either evening or morning, so he set off in search of her.

People had seen her going towards the Bright Path kolkhoz, probably making for the old stable where she had been a number of times already. With something like hatred for his mare, Frolov walked along the washed-out road, across a field of beaten-down wheat, and through a cold damp wood. But Soldatka was not there and nobody had seen her. "Go to the Fifteenth Anniversary of October," they told him, "a herd of cattle was driven through yesterday, back from evacuation, there were horses with them, mebbe she'll be there."

Frolov heeded the advice and made for the farm. Had he known how far it was he would probably have put it off until the next day. He arrived late in the evening. No Soldatka. There had certainly been a herd, going north, but not a single horse among them.

He settled to spend the night with a team-leader, an ex-seaman from a Guards submarine, square-set, with iron hands, who rumbled like a new drum. The sailor warmed him with home-distilled, then gave demonstrations of strength, lifting a wardrobe huge as a railway coach from place to place, following it with the table,

and a chair with Frolov on it. Witnessing his phenomenal strength, Frolov could easily believe in the daring exploits the sailor had carried out at the front. He too would have liked to talk about capturing the enemy pillbox, but somehow he felt awkward about it, and said nothing.

In the midst of their talk Frolov went out into the yard to relieve himself, and suddenly heard the distant calling of some unknown migratory birds. It recalled to mind a day, a couple of weeks ago, when he had been mowing in a forest glade and had heard a similar calling—vague, distant, disturbing. He listened, leaning on his scythe, with a strange longing, feeling in that call the sadness of parting and a vague joy in meeting the future. Soldatka too stood motionless, her head thrown back, her neck arched, shivers running over her skin, lips trembling. Suddenly she whinnied softly, a tender call. And from beyond the trees came another quiet, soft whinny. Soldatka's ears went up, she turned her head to Frolov as though asking permission to go, or taking leave of him, and went towards that distant, tender call. "Where are you off?" Frolov shouted, but Soldatka stopped only for a moment, long enough to cast a look of reproach at him, and he let her go. And she, the old fool, trotted lightly, gaily across the field, her long mane floating in the wind. It was some time before Frolov overtook her by the forest. A woman and two boys were following a rusty, creaking harrow drawn by a black stallion like something from a fairy-tale. Steam came from his nostrils, there was fire in his eye, he was smooth and sleek and everything about him was perfection, all that was required by poor, lonely, languishing Soldatka. But Frolov parted them and pitilessly led Soldatka away from the handsome young stallion.

Now, hearing the thrilling call of these unknown birds which at that time almost heralded the appearance of the black stallion, Frolov realised where he should seek Soldatka. Not here, but back there, on the other side of the settlement. That was where she would be, no doubt of it.

He took leave of the sailor after a last glass for the journey and set off back through the wet and mud, urged on by strange tremors, a strange feverish unrest like a premonition of misfortune. He was sure he was on

the right way now, but he had to hurry, quick, quicker, as though some urgent call were driving him. Fortunately the clouds had parted a little and through a gap, narrow as a keyhole, a pale moon looked down.

By dawn he was back; he stood a moment by the warehouse calling Soldatka, but there was still no sign of her. If she had returned she would have been somewhere near, but she hadn't. He did not want to go home. He rested for an hour or so right there in the warehouse, hung up a "Gone to town" notice on the gate and went on, in the direction where he was sure he would find his foolish Soldatka.

The premonition of misfortune, of trouble, never left him, he felt feverish with it. That feverishness may have come from the chill which had penetrated to his very bones, from his weariness, or it may have come from the fear that some calamity had happened to his sagacious, affectionate Soldatka who never refused him anything. Yet with his thinking mind he told himself that nothing could have happened to her, it wasn't the first time she had gone off and she'd always come back safely.

It was a clear, fresh day. The sun now thrust itself into the gap in the clouds occupied earlier by the moon, thrust them apart and shone wholeheartedly. It turned quiet and warm. Butterflies came to life, insects hummed and birds called to one another on all notes.

By midday, after crossing Bredikhin wood, Frolov reached the place where the handsome black had appeared before Soldatka's dazzled eyes. The grain was reaped and the field bristled with stubble. Frolov crossed it, skirted a grove and saw the village below. He saw the stable, too, and a stallion sauntering behind a low fence very pleased with himself and the world, desplaying his beauty and strength to all. Steam came from his nostrils, fire from his eye, foam hung from his hot lip and he struck the ground with a silver hoof, biting the wooden crossbar of the fence.

But no Soldatka. "Yes," they told him, "she was here, day before yesterday. The stallion covered her, then she hung about here all day, she was still here the last eve, but now ye can see, she's gone off somewhere. Granny Mitrofanikha was gathering cranberries and she saw a grey mare, right early, one as she didn't know, like

yours, seemingly, it was nigh Skrytny, but that's a long way."

Long way or not he had to go.

He went through the forest, stopping every now and then to call Soldatka and listen for an answering whinny, listen not so much with his strained ears but with his whole self. He was worn out with hunger, weariness, sleeplessness. But when in despair he was ready to turn back, when for the last time he called in an empty hopeless voice: "Soldatka! " he suddenly caught a distant neigh and his heart leaped. "Eh, you darned beast! " he said and ran towards the sound. Then he stopped and shouted again, and again heard her neigh, this time quite close—it seemed to come from the bushes in a gully. She neighed with a youthful, mischievous gaiety, happy and carefree. Frolov broke off a thick branch to give the old fool a good lesson, to give her just a little of what she deserved for all the trouble she had given him, and began pushing through the bushes. He came out and saw her.

She was lying at the bottom of the gully in a pool of blood, her belly ripped open, her handsome head flung back on the slender neck, looking happily at Frolov with lifeless eyes. A second ago she had been alive, but she must have heard his call through the mist of a death-dream. Or perhaps she had not even heard it, perhaps with her last breath she had had a vision of happiness, neighed joyously and with that neigh had gone.

It was a little while before Frolov could understand what had happened to her. But somewhat later it became clear: she had stumbled on a chance bomb which the Germans had once dropped, and which had lain quietly until now, waiting all this time for Soldatka.

Frolov went back without seeking a road, seeing nothing about him, in a kind of delirium. Foolish, foolish beast, I warned you, he kept whispering, but the thought that if he had remembered that stallion earlier he could have saved Soldatka gave him no peace, the guilt of her death lay heavy on him.

Eh, that war, that war, he kept thinking. That accursed war, no getting clear of it, no getting clean from it, can't get away from it even yet. There it was, hidden in a forest gully.

It was dusk when Frolov reached home. He had hoped that as soon as he dragged himself indoors and fell onto his bed he would drown in a dreamless sleep; but sleep would not come. He lay a while, then changed his clothes and went to Nastya. There was nowhere else he could take his pain, only to her, in all the world she was the person nearest, dearest to him. He knew that today he would understand her and she would understand him, there wouldn't even be any need for words, just a look, a gesture, a movement of the hand and he would understand her, and she him. Petty quarrels, petty offence—all that was so small and unimportant. A person ought to rise above silly squabbles. Bad indeed if suddenly death seizes you with ill-will in your heart, or still worse, malice. And in its own time it comes to all, the bad, the good, the beasts.

Nastya came out to him in the yard.

"Well?" she said, looking past him.

As always, her dry alienation drained all his confidence away. He looked at her haughty face, her beautiful, cold eyes in which he saw now sorrow, now bottomless clearness. No, he was not timid, that was not the feeling. Standing by her he felt to blame in some way, but how, he himself did not know. He did not judge her, he believed that two people always could and should find a common tongue if even one of them really wished it. And it wasn't her fault, he thought, that they couldn't find the way to each other, it was his.

She looked at him with her beautiful, tired, cold eyes. No, she was not angry with him, nor did she scorn him, she cherished no sense of injury—there was nothing; he not only felt it, he knew it. It was simply that this was the way she was, living in a strange, lurking, frightened world of her own. That was her mystery which he understood in this moment. Although Nastya had never seen the war face to face, it had chilled her heart. Fear sat within Nastya, a sense that all life was hopeless and she without defence against it—this was what was in her and would be to the end of her life. There was no key here to her weak spirit, only sympathy could cure her—and forget about your foolish self.

Frolov understood that and knew that although he had come for consolation, he would never find with her

either consolation or forgetfulness. They lived on different planets. But still, he tried.

"Let's get married, Nastya. I've none of my own and you've no man, we're both alone."

She laughed bleakly.

"You're a queer kind, Serafim. You know—"

"You'll learn to love me," he said, knowing very well now that she would never be quiet and happy with anyone, but with him she would find understanding and pity. He had probed her secret which she herself did not know and which no other would be likely to probe and understand.

"You're all dreams and sighs, Serafim," she said sadly, "and there's naught else. Forgive me and don't be angered. I've nothing for you."

She turned and went. He was not offended nor sad, he even laughed at his failure and went away smiling, as though something very cheering had happened.

He had three hundred grams of home-distilled in reserve. He went home, downed it, bit into a pickled cucumber and it took effect at once. Feeling quieter, he went out and sat on the porch. In the halflight he saw Romka in the next-door yard calling his neglected poultry, remembered Anfisa and went to seek her in her new home.

A strong wind was driving the clouds before it, but Frolov was warmed by the drink he had taken, he strolled past the quiet houses falling into their nocturnal sleep and even sang a song popular before the war.

At last he found the cottage where Anfisa had taken a room; the windows were dark but he was in no mood to go back and hammered loudly at the door.

"Who's there?" came Anfisa's sleepily startled voice.

"A friend."

"Who'd that be?"

"It's me, open the door!"

"Frolov? What's brought you? You're plain daft!" She opened the door and lighted a lamp.

He entered, eyes narrowed against the light, without looking at Anfisa because he was suddenly ashamed of waking her.

"I was passing and just thought I'd look in."

"Just look in," she grumbled. "Well, sit down."

The room was small; there was a bed, a table and a chair, and nowhere to put anything else. Anfisa seated herself on the bed, he took the chair.

"How are you going on? " she asked.

"Oh, all right, this way and that. And you? "

"All right, too. Fine. Making out. I smell of varnish all the time, I like it, it's like having scent on."

"Not so much. There's none of nature's smells in varnish, but scent—that's flowers."

But she did not smell of varnish, she smelt more like fresh bread—warm and nourishing. The wrap she had hurriedly pulled on was small for her, it looked ready to burst at the seams.

"I've had a drink or two," Frolov announced.

"I can see that."

She pushed her hair back, white arms raised: he rose from his chair, laid his hands on her breasts and pressed her back onto the pillow. She let out a vague sound and struggled beneath him like a fish out of water, but he held her firmly. His hands explored her body as he pressed himself against her. Then Anfisa doubled up a leg and pushed him off her, panting.

"Feeling your oats, stallion? " she said in disgust. "Get out of here, you devil's spawn. Get out! " she screamed.

"Now, now, don't be cross," said Frolov with a twisted grin and made another attempt to embrace her, but Anfisa pushed him outside into the yard and banged the door.

He sat down on the step and whined like a homeless puppy.

It began to rain, at first in occasional noisy drops that splashed down and stopped. These were soon followed by a real steady, quiet downpour that streamed over Frolov and wet him to the skin. But he sat there on the threshold and didn't move.

"Are you still out there? " Anfisa asked through the door. He mumbled something.

"You're crazy," she said and opened it. "Come in! Come in, I tell you! You'll get your death, pneumonia like as not. You're out o' your wits! "

He did not want to go in, but she dragged him in by the collar.

"Get your clothes off, fool, you've got to get dry."

His teeth were actually chattering with cold so he obediently undressed, obediently lay down on a mattress by the door which she took from her own bed, shivered under a blanket and couldn't get warm.

Anfisa didn't sleep, she tossed and turned and suddenly burst into tears.

"Well, there it is, a woman's lot," she said sadly. "Come along then, dunderhead, I'll warm you."

But he didn't go.

He was chilled and had now no desire whatsoever to go to her.

"Come," she said, then saw he wouldn't, left her bed and lay down beside him.

She was wearing only a slip. Frolov was suddenly as hot as though he'd been doused with boiling water. He flung his arms round her, drawing in the scent of her soft warm body, but at this moment he remembered Soldatka and turned to stone.

He himself did not know why he suddenly remembered Soldatka but the memory came and he knew at once it would be no good with Anfisa. He wanted his male strength to come back, but it didn't. He was ashamed, he felt he had disgraced himself before this woman, that he had got her worked up for nothing, but Anfisa seemed to understand how it was with him and soothed him, gently stroking his head.

"Don't worry, dear lad," she said, knowing that he had no power over himself and she couldn't help him. "It's no great thing, come, quiet down, silly, foolish fellow, it's all right, now."

He pushed his face between her firm breasts.

"Soldatka was torn open by a bomb today," he burst into tears, and fell asleep in his drunken weeping.

When he wakened in the morning, Anfisa was gone.

His trousers and shirt hung over the back of the chair, clean and pressed. He dressed and went home. He seemed to be one of the unlucky ones, everything went wrong with him, not like other people.

Out in the street he suddenly realised that he was a stranger here, a person unneeded. Every person should have his own soil, his own place, but his soil, his place was not here. He had only thought it was. But it wasn't.

On the Volga, that was his place. Here he was a burden, an irritation, a mote in Nastya's eye, while by the Volga he was wanted.

The great thing was to make up his mind. Once it was made up, action was easy and even happy. He gave in his notice at the factory. The management regarded him as a good, reliable man, there had even been talk of putting his picture up on the board of honour, so his notice was accepted with regretful handshakes.

Living in the settlement, Frolov had acquired various new items of clothing—a coat, a good navy-blue gabardine suit costing seven hundred and twenty-four rubles, twenty-six kopecks, a pair of good brown shoes for best and a pair of black ones for every day. True, he hadn't yet worn them, he had been saving them, wearing his old uniform—tunic, top-boots and greatcoat. He wore this for the journey, too—it was convenient and unassuming. His civilian clothes he packed in his suitcase and knapsack.

He made no farewells. He thanked Granny Filippovna for her quiet way of letting him alone and set off on his journey.

He felt no particular melancholy. His life there, the various papers, Soldatka, Nastya, Anfisa, the factory management, Romka—all that was now the past, like one of those dreams which follow an everyday pattern. He was living now neither in the past nor the present, but in the misty future.

On the third day Frolov arrived in Cheboksary. He liked the quiet simplicity of the town, and its situation right over the Volga. The people living there were not Russian and they spoke their own musical Chuvash language. They were affectionately kind among themselves and warmly friendly to Frolov. Good-hearted, quiet, unassuming people, modest in their way, pleasant looking, pleasant spoken. Frolov felt awkward talking with them—they knew his language but he didn't know theirs although he had come to live in their country. I'll have to learn it, so as to feel easy, he thought and set to work at once learning a few words.

After some hours of tedious waiting on the landing stage, the ferry at last came in, crowded with people. He pushed through somehow onto the deck. It started back

and he turned his face to the vitalising air of Mother Volga. The ferry deposited him on the far bank and left him there alone.

He stood there over the Volga, watching the departing ferry, hearing the rustling of butterflies, insects and worms in the grass under his feet, the fish leaping in the water, the birds calling in the sky. He breathed the primeval scent of the earth and felt that this was his place, prepared for him by destiny, answering his wishes and character.

He remembered the instructions Maria Andrianovna had given him for reaching her village, got his bearings and walked boldly off by the river.

He walked a long way, walked until he was tired. And just as he felt that tiredness he saw to his right some old cottages, dark with age, on a hill. He climbed the path and at once, with no preparation or expectation, saw Maria Andrianovna by the very first cottage.

She was standing in the yard, mixing feed for pigs as though kneading dough, humming some Chuvash song he didn't know.

Frolov's footsteps were heard first by a dog, a shaggy yard-dog that limped on three legs. It let out such a burst of furious barking that it got hoarse, then it tried to get at him but the chain stopped that.

Maria Andrianovna looked up, saw Frolov and blushed bright red.

"Turned up like a bad penny," said Frolov, hiding his embarrassment behind a joke.

"Look who's come! " she cried gladly, and then didn't know what to do with her sticky hands. She finally wiped them on her apron and held one out to Frolov.

She led him into the cool clean cottage where he immediately felt the prevailing atmosphere of quiet, comfort and domesticity. A sleek cat was asleep on a high white bed. Maria Andrianovna and Frolov stood in the middle of the room, looked at each other and smiled. And he could see in her eyes, her smile, that he was an awaited, desired guest in this quiet, comfortable home. Then the children came running in and clustered round him and he gave to each a book with coloured pictures and a slab of chocolate bought specially for the occasion.

In the evening Maria Andrianovna heated the bath-house and Frolov washed away and steamed away all the past dirt, all the old troubles and emerged like a child with no past, only a cloudless present and a cloudless, endless future. He emerged, melting in spirit, and saw a table with a white cloth, a bottle and various dishes to go with it.

The children were asleep in the other room so he sat alone at that royal table, drank a sweetly delicate home-distilled—he had never tasted anything like it! —and waited for Maria Andrianovna, who had taken his place in the bath-house.

He was already feeling a slight effect from it when she came, clean and shining, shy as a maid. They drank, looking at one another, and each saw the same thing in the other's eyes. Frolov put his arm round her and she pressed close to him, trembling happily under his hands. Then she opened the high white bed and lay down, covering her face shyly with her curved arm.

The days slipped by, like mist, light and evanescent, drawing Frolov into the current of his new life. It was autumn, warm, dry, translucent—none of those cold, depressing rains he had known so recently. The village was small, so was the kolkhoz, there were few people and much for them to do. Frolov hired out to drive the plough.

Every morning he left the house in old pants worn at the knees and a wide cloth shirt, with Maria Andrianovna accompanying him to the edge of the village, then slowly, hardly believing his own happiness, went to the field.

They were ploughing up fallow land. The soil squealed as the shares sliced through it—but not from pain, from gratitude to man, preparing it for new maternity. The plough was pulled by an ox called Grishka, with a black hide, protruding brown eyes and a quiet nature. Sometimes a rook, equally black, would alight on Grishka's back, turn its head, click its beak and give Frolov an enigmatic look before flying away, cawing some prophecy. At midday Zhenka or Tatka or both of them would come with his dinner in a bundle. He ate it, talked awhile with them and felt no tiredness.

In the evening he came home to Maria Andrianovna,

whose quiet skilled hands held all the comfort, and she ungrudgingly shared her happiness with Frolov. He was the desired complement to her peace and the peace of her big family. This thought, that he was a pleasant, desired person but not absolutely necessary, he was only a complement to the well-being created by Maria but not the source of this well-being, and that all this firm life which had come into being without him woudn't collapse if he suddenly, well, died—this thought sometimes troubled him, but there was no other trouble.

People were no longer bathing in the Volga, the water already had a chill. But Frolov risked it, sometimes he would run down to the empty bank and dive into the grey, already muddy water.

One day, dressing after a bathe, he heard a tender, calling whinny and stopped short at the familiarity and sadness of that equine voice. And then a chestnut mare emerged from the forest, crossed the meadow lifting her slender legs as though reluctant to touch the cold, dew-wet grass, and vanished in the thicket by the bank. She vanished, and again he heard her whinny, calling up a vague unease and melancholy. The melancholy left him but the unease remained—a vague something like the beginning of sickness.

No good life, no closeness to the earth, no sweetness of a woman's body could soothe the unease which penetrated into him like a splinter. At first he tried to pull it out, at first he didn't want to let what was past enter into him, because that past had made him the slave of some other person's life, but the splinter only went in deeper. There, in Yolkino, Nastya's weak heart remained, Nastya whose spirit had been drained by the recent war. Perhaps he had only imagined her secret? Let it be imagination, but what could he do if he felt he had a duty to one who was weak, and this duty was no less important than man's duty to the unploughed earth.

Foolish, conscientious Frolov's heart, whither are you taking him?

YURY NAGIBIN

(b. 1920)

He was born in Moscow and studied at the Script-Writers' Faculty of the Moscow Film Institute. His first story was published in 1940. He took an active part in the Great Patriotic War of 1941-1945 and, after being wounded, was a war correspondent for the rest of the war, publishing stories and essays. War themes remained central to his works in the years immediately following the war. The nature of the writer's gift became apparent in the stories belonging to this period: his fine sense of lyricism, great stylistic skill and interest in moral problems. The theme of "man and nature" has acquired a significant place in his work; his stories inspired by the defence of goodness, beauty and love. His works in the '50s such as *The Battle for Height, In Early Spring, Komarov, The Nightly Guest* and *The Pipe*, were highly acclaimed by the general reading public.

The thematic scope of Nagibin's work became even wider between the 60s and 70s. He turned to recollections of his childhood and wrote the cycle *Clean Ponds* and the long short story *Lanes of My Childhood*. His reflections on the present-day countryside were expressed in the story *Pages from Trubnikov's Life*.

Nagibin's best works in recent years have been dedicated to eminent figures in Russian literature and art. His story *The Lilac* is about Rachmaninov as a young man.

THE LILAC

It was an odd summer, everything was mixed up. By the end of May the birch leaves were still as weak and tender and as yellow-green as in early spring, reminding one of the fluff of little chickens. Not until the beginning of June did the bird-cherry blossom; the lilac came out even later. The oldest inhabitants of Ivanovka did not remember another such summer. But then they hardly remembered anything—when the lilies-of-the-valley were supposed to come out, when the night violets usually bloomed, when the dandelions were to go to seed, or even when the first mushrooms should put in an appearance. Could it be that this odd summer had brought confusion to their old brains, knocking out of them a remembrance of the eternal order of things?

The general confusion was increased by terrific thunderstorms and downpours that ought not to have occurred at the beginning of June (their time was in August, when the grain was harvested and the fields were covered with bronze stubble). The lilac burst into bloom all at

once, in a single night, in the garden, in the park and all along the lanes. The proper order of blooming was: first the native lilac (white, blue and pink) foamed on the tall bushes fencing the Old Park and filling the space between the annexe and the stables; in five or six days the low bushes of Persian lilac forming a hedge between yard and orchard became purple with clusters of cloyingly sweet flowers; finally, a week later, the Hungarian lilac thrust branches bending under the weight of pale lavender blooms, the loveliest of all, into the windows of the big house. And instead, all the lilac came out at once after a fierce night thunderstorm with dangerous, vertical swords of lightning that made all the inhabitants of the estate shiver in fright. Even the bush of lilac near the pavilion, a bush that had never before blossomed, lighted the ruddy torch of a single cluster.

When Verochka Skalon surreptitiously ran out into the garden early the next morning, having escaped the eagle eye of her governess Missochka, she gasped and clutched her hands to her chest at the sight of this ebullience of lilac.

The country house was run on a rigid schedule. Everyone except Alexander Ilyich Ziloti (and nobody could understand why he should enjoy such privilege) got up at eight o'clock. The Sattins (whose house it was), their relatives and whoever of the neighbours might be visiting them, all strictly observed the rules and regulations. Verochka, who at the age of fifteen found it essential to get at the root of all phenomena, could not understand why an exception should be made of Ziloti, famous pianist though he was, a professor of the Conservatoire. Guests more eminent than he had been expected to toe the mark. But today Verochka decided that exemption was granted him as compensation for the prison regime to which his jealous and adoring wife Vera Pavlovna Ziloti (neé Tretyakova) subjected him. Vera Pavlovna was madly jealous of her twenty-seven-year-old husband, who bore a burden of fame, family, and professional cares too heavy for his years. She was jealous with a crude, vulgar jealousy, a purblind, absurd jealousy that ill became the daughter of Pavel Tretyakov, illustrious collector of Russian paintings. She was jealous of the three Skalon girls and even of thirteen-year-old Natasha Satti-

na, to say nothing of Missochka and the pretty doe-eyed chambermaid Marina and all the village girls who brought wild strawberries and cream and cheese to the big house. This prevented Verochka from determining who Alexander Ziloti was really in love with. And for her to untangle love knots was of even more importance than to fathom the mysteries of nature's odd behaviour.

It was considered as impermissible to issue from the house earlier than the appointed time as to lie in bed beyond it. It was even more dangerous because one who overslept could blame it on a headache, but how could one explain a too early walk?

Verochka's thoughts had not turned to the Zilotis by accident but by having caught a glimpse of Vera Pavlovna's pale face at the second-storey window of the big house as she ran down the steps of the annexe where she lived with her mother, sisters and Missochka. Vera Pavlovna was sleeping in the nursery these days because her little son was not well. It was from the nursery her jealous ear had caught the faint creak of a distant door. Verochka hoped that Alexander Ilyich was nestled comfortably in his bed, but what if he, too, had decided to take an early morning walk? Who knew what wild fancies might enter Vera Pavlovna's head and what the consequences of these fancies might be? Verochka almost turned back to the house, but so sweet and seductive was the perfume of the lilac that she said to herself she would not let anyone spoil her pleasure, come what may! She threw herself into the bushes as into a river and was instantly doused from head to foot: the leaves and heavy clusters of flowers were still wet from the night's downpour.

A rustle in the bushes made her freeze to the spot: Good heavens! What if she should really meet Ziloti here and have to carry about with her the burden of a grown-up's secret? Oh, she had not the slightest desire to know who Alexander Ilyich was in love with and whether or not there were grounds for his poor wife's jealousy.

The rustle was repeated—a rustle and cracking of twigs; someone was making his way directly through the lilac, shaking the branches, snapping off the dry little twigs at the bottom of the bushes. Verochka's sensitive

heart responded to the least fright or agitation; at present it leaped into her throat, where it pounded mercilessly, causing painful detonations in her head. The escapade that had seemed so delightful a few minutes before when she had slipped undetected past her mother's and Missochka's bedrooms, now seemed wicked and terrifying.

Why must I pay so dearly for every misdemeanor? she thought unhappily. After all, what have I to fear? What if I do run into Ziloti? He is an honourable man and will defend me against undeserved incriminations. My only fault is that I left the house without permission. All they can do is scold me, not let me go out, make me write an extra English dictation or learn another piece of music by heart. They can't kill me for it.

Her persuasions were effective, her heart returned to its rightful nest, the blood withdrew from her cheeks and the pounding in her ears subsided.

She cautiously parted the lilac boughs and only a step away beheld Sergei Rachmaninov, nephew of the owner of the estate. He had lifted some of the blooms and buried his face in them. When he raised his head his forehead, nose, cheeks and chin were wet, and little starred flowers were clinging to his thread of a moustache. There was nothing remarkable about his burying his face in the dewy flowers—Verochka could do that too. But the other thing Sergei was doing (or rather, Sergei Vassilyevich, as she was expected to call her seventeen-year-old cousin)—that other thing was extremely interesting: he chose a cluster, put it in his mouth carefully, as if going to eat it, then just as carefully pulled it out and swallowed. Verochka did the same thing and it left a bitter-sweet coldness in her mouth. She made a face, then repeated the experiment. She tried the white lilac, then the blue, then the lavender. Each had its own taste. The white was like licking the cork of mother's bottle of French scent, it even made the tip of her tongue go numb as the scent did. The lavender tasted like ink. The blue tasted best—sweet, and with the flavour of lemon rind.

The pleasure she took in this lilac wine gave Verochka a better opinion of her long-haired cousin. He was not even her cousin, really—not a close cousin, that is—

one far removed, but the grown-ups were always claiming some sort of relationship to everybody so that almost all of the older people were aunts and uncles and the younger ones cousins. The Skalon sisters had only recently made the acquaintance of Sergei Rachmaninov in the Sattins' home, where they stopped over on their way from Petersburg to Ivanovka. They were not overjoyed at the prospect of spending the summer with their newfound cousin. Everything about this lanky youth was grotesque and out of proportion: his enormous hands, as broad as shovels, and feet to match; his stringy brown hair that hung about his shoulders like a priest's; his big drooping nose and wide, if finely modelled, mouth; his dull dark eyes that looked out sombrely from under overhanging brows. Tense, wary, ungracious, not at all attractive—that, at least, was the opinion formed by the sisters, and all attempts on the part of their little cousin Natasha Sattina to modify it by saying he was only too shy and self-conscious were of no avail.

In Ivanovka, however, Sergei appeared in an entirely different light. He was ever so gracious, solicitous, sociable, and given to laughter. The slightest thing would set him laughing till he cried, till he sank down exhausted. Verochka, the little vixen, sometimes took advantage of this weakness to make him look ridiculous, but he was never offended. Natasha Sattina was offended in his stead. Once she even rebuked Verochka but the older girl quickly put her in her place; Natasha pouted sulkily but never took such a liberty again.

From the moment Verochka saw her cousin drinking the bitter wine of the lilac clusters she took a new interest in him. Who could he be in love with? Never before had she posed this question, although the love affairs of all who lived at Ivanovka and of all who visited it (and it was a rare day that did not bring some guest) were of primary importance to her. No doubt he was in love with her elder sister Tatusha, a haughty and imperious twenty-two-year-old beauty. Everybody seemed to be in love with Tatusha. But who was in love with Sergei? (Dared she even to herself call him Sergei?) Natasha Sattina? The very thought of such a thing made Verochka burst out laughing, luckily without making any noise because her mouth was stuffed with lilac. But the

musician's sharp ear had caught some slight rustle. He froze with a sprig of lilac in his hand like Bacchus in the well-known painting by Bruni. His dull dark eyes searched the bushes. Verochka stooped down swiftly and his glance skimmed over her head.

Natasha Sattina was a tall, stately, grave girl who tried to look and behave like her elders. Her mouth gave her away. It was a rose-bud mouth that had not yet assumed final form and therefore was not under full control—was wont, in fact, to defy her in a way that made her look foolish, although she was far from being foolish. Her mouth was out of harmony with the severe modelling of the rest of her face. The brow, the nose, the eyes, the gentle rise of her cheekbones—all these had reached a charming perfection of form; only the amorphousness of her lips threw Natasha back into childhood and gave a comic aspect to her graveness, her conscientiousness, her air of importance, her proneness to criticise. Verochka, on the other hand, with all her vivacity, light-mindedness and impulsiveness, with none of Natasha's serious qualities was more nearly "the young lady". Natasha still belonged to the nursery.

These thoughts, elicited by the "discovery" of her long-haired cousin, distracted Verochka's attention from the lilac wine. But not Sergei's. He attacked the blooms with a swift dexterity, not surprising considering the hugeness of his hands and mouth. Verochka's mouth, being small and delicate, had to be fed small clusters. But she must hurry if she was to get back to her bedroom before the ringing of the bell. She put both hands to work. Dew sprayed her from head to foot, a bitterness stung her palate, petals clung to her cheeks and chin.

"Ah, Flibbertigibbet! Aren't you ashamed?" There was rebuke in Rachmaninov's drawling tone. "It's sheer barbarity to eat lilac."

He had the irritating habit of making up nicknames for everybody. He called Tatusha "Tuyechka", then "Mentor"; the English miss who was Verochka's governess, "Missochka"; Lelya, who was mad on the ballet, "Toe-Tripper"; and Verochka "Flibbertigibbet" (which was quite unfair; she admitted to being quick-tempered and impulsive, she easily switched from laughter to tears,

but that didn't make her a flibbertigibbet!). For some time Verochka had intended speaking to Sergei Vassilyevich about her nickname but now she would have to put it off; she really must be a flibbertigibbet if she could gobble up lilac with such appetite. But a fine gentleman her cousin turned out to be! He himself gave the example for such idiocy and now dared to feign innocence! Oh, of course, he was not sucking the flowers, he was just sniffing their delicate fragrance!

"I hope," she gasped, "that as an honourable man you will never speak of this. Not to a soul! "

"Flib-ber-ti-gib-bet! " Rachmaninov drawled the word tauntingly through his nose. "Who'd ever believe me if I did tell them? You ought to see yourself! "

Verochka drew her hands down her cheeks; the palms were instantly wet and to her fingertips clung blue, white, and purple flowers, cobwebs, bits of this and that. When had that horrid cousin of hers had time to wipe *his* face and assume such an angelic look? There was not a drop, not a speck on his large face, pink with the season's first sunburn.

Verochka was easily agitated, the least little thing made her breath come in little gasps.

"I beg you.... It was so silly of me.... You're beastly! All you want is to make somebody look foolish! "

"Oh, come, Flibbertigibbet." His voice was softer now, almost gentle.

Verochka had not expected this from her derisive cousin, usually one could detect sarcasm even in his gentleness.

"Have no fear, I won't tell anybody if you don't want me to." He had reverted to his usual bantering tone but now it was kindly and inoffensive. "What's there to tell? The poor little girl was hungry and decided to graze on lilac, that's all. Oh, come, come, I won't—I won't, honestly I won't. Look, Agafon's hobbled over to the bell. Run, or you're lost! "

"And you? "

"They don't keep an eye on me as they do on you. The only thing I mustn't do is appear in the nunnery—that's what I call your wing—or receive ladies in my quarters. Natasha, for instance. There'd be the deuce to pay."

He went on talking but Verochka did not hear what he said. With her fists clasped to her pounding heart she ran as fast as her legs would carry her back to the house and succeeded in reaching the steps before Agafon struck the bell, and to slip into her bedroom before Missochka got up looking as bright and neat as if she had not just got out of bed.

Rachmaninov remained where he was, pensively touching the lilac blooms. He was trying to comprehend why that unexpected encounter should have touched and disturbed him so.

Verochka Skalon was very pretty, with light brown hair—long and thick and shot through with gold—with pale skin tinged by a delicate flush, with eager burning eyes and tightly shut lips. The grave, almost mournful line of her lips contradicted the soft contours of the rest of her face and made dubious the general impression of her being a kind-hearted but none-too-bright young lady. But what had he to do with Verochka Skalon, this flibbertigibbet, this general's daughter who was head over ears in love with her childhood friend Sergei Tolbuzin, yet every other day chose another favourite who was no doubt blissfully unaware of being the object of her choice even though she gave herself away by blushing and trembling for fear her secret be discovered? He, Rachmaninov, was a wandering musician whose one task was to practise on the piano until he was dizzy, to sweat day after day over the four-hand piano arrangement of the incomparable Tchaikovsky's *Sleeping Beauty*, and to snatch an hour or two for writing his own compositions. He nurtured the bold intention of soon presenting his first piano concerto for public appraisal. The time for shy little nocturnes and other trifling pieces had passed; he had his word to say in music and he must think of nothing else. But still—how glad he was to have enjoyed the wonderful perfume of the lilac that morning, the feeling of the cold drops creeping under his shirt, the sight of that young face, so artless and so touching.

The day that had begun strangely and perturbingly for Verochka Skalon, proceeded in the old way without anything unexpected occurring. Nobody knew of her escapade. Even Vera Pavlovna's jealous eye, forever on the watch, had somehow missed her. Her cousin's behav-

our was beyond criticism: he did not allow himself by so much as a glance or a smile to refer to their secret but held himself a very model of dignity and propriety. In his effort to reassure Verochka he even went a little too far. It was necessary for him to hold himself aloof in the presence of others but surely it was not necessary when they were alone. Did he think it was the usual thing for people to go into the garden early in the morning to drink lilac wine? It was so unusual nobody would believe it if told. But Verochka knew she would not tell anybody, not even the loyal Natasha Sattina, who was as silent as the grave, to say nothing of the priggish Tatusha (a real Mentor!) and the teaser Lelya. But then if she and Sergei went on pretending nothing had happened it would really be as if nothing had happened, and that would be too, too bad.

Slowly this long, hot, glorious June day rolled away to where all the other days had gone never to return, taking with it everything it had brought: milk fresh from the dairy and strawberries fresh from the garden (who ever heard of garden strawberries ripening at the same time the lilac burst into bloom?); bathing and frolicking in the park; a dreadful English dictation (Verochka made more mistakes than usual on this particular day); Alexander Ilyich Ziloti's terror at discovering a pimple on his cheek (cancer!); unfounded and highly amusing bursts of jealousy on the part of his wife; deafening sounds of the piano (Sergei Rachmaninov playing for the umpteenth time some Schloezer etude); Ziloti playing Beethoven's *Rage at Losing a Groschen* for them again (everybody truly admired the perfection of his performance but they would have preferred hearing something new even if less perfectly rendered); a late dinner as usual ("The footmen are playing cards! " exclaimed Alexander Ziloti in mock horror. "Adrian the butler has a handful of trumps!"); a ride in the brake; tea in the evening, at which Vera Pavlovna complained of "a devastating toothache" (the tea was served by pretty little Marina instead of drunken Adrian); pleasant banter in the summer-house and Sergei's unpleasant teasing of Tatusha about her Moscow friend Ivan Schnell (everyone but Tatusha was amused by it; she could not bear having fun made of those who admired her); long farewells, as if

parting forever, before going to bed; a "moon-bath" on the balcony with Lelya and Missochka, who grew melancholy as night drew near; the caress of cool homespun linen sheets.

Before falling asleep Verochka recalled the morning's adventure and was surprised that she should have been so frightened. What a child she still must be if the slightest thing could upset her so! And what a pity she should have lost her dignity in her cousin's presence! He wasn't so bad after all, in fact he was quite nice. You could be friends with a boy like that—that is, if you kept him in hand. They simply hadn't understood him in Moscow. It was only when they got to Ivanovka that Tatusha discovered he had something in him. But then Tatusha found boys for herself everywhere. Well, what did it matter? The important thing was that the next day Mitya Ziloti, Alexander Ilyich's brother, was coming here from the adjoining village of Timofeyevka, and Verochka must be sure to find out who *he* was in love with.

Instead of clearing up matters, the arrival of Mitya made things more complicated than ever. The minute he climbed out of the gig Sasha Sattin came running up to make the amazing announcement that the raspberries were ripe. Nobody believed him, of course, but all sorts of unexpected things were happening this summer and so, after scolding him for spreading false rumours, everybody marched off to the raspberry patch. The clamour brought Alexander Ilyich running out on to the porch, and so delighted was he by the prospect of eating his beloved raspberries that he seized Tatusha by the hand and rushed for the garden. He was instantly brought back by Vera Pavlovna's suffering a slight sun-stroke on the porch. He went towards his wife waving his fists in the air while the rest of the party proceeded to the raspberry bushes where they discovered Sasha's news had hardly been exaggerated at all. The raspberries could not be said to be ripe, but the hard tasteless berries were already turning red and this in itself was a miracle. The cherries really were ripe but Aunt Varvara had decreed they were not to be touched until the next day.

On the way back Tatusha, as if reading her sister's mind, attached herself to Mitya and pressed him to tell her who he was in love with. Mitya—flattered, embarras-

sed and blushing beneath his coat of tan—maintained a stubborn silence, but Tatusha was not one to be put off. Suddenly Verochka became annoyed by her sister's insistence; she suspected it was not mere curiosity but some more personal reason that made Tatusha so anxious to know. Tatusha had never been so pretty and she was eager to conquer all the males, from Mitya and Sergei to Alexander Ilyich and even Uncle Sattin. The sooner Mitya answered her the better, but at this point Sergei interfered and almost spoiled everything:

"Don't think Tuyechka cares who you're in love with, Mitya; she only cares who the handsome Schnell's in love with, but everybody knows who *that* is."

Tatusha had to give Sergei a good dressing down before she could take up Mitya again. "Just tell us her initials," she pleaded. Blushing painfully, Mitya strode over to a birch tree, broke off a twig and traced two letters on the white trunk. He did it so quickly that nobody could follow him and the blunt end of the twig left no marks on the bark. Sergei insisted that the first letter was N and that Mitya's beloved was Natasha Skalon. "Poor, poor Schnell! " moaned Sergei. Verochka, however, though she was jealous of Mitya's preference for her sister, thought she had detected the letter N. Furthermore, an inner voice told her it was not Tatusha Mitya was in love with no matter what letters he had traced on the tree. A little later, when Tatusha and the confused Mitya were whispering together, she heard the name of Nina mentioned and her heart missed a beat as it dawned upon her that Mitya was in love with Sergei Tolbuzin's sister.

Sergei Tolbuzin was only a year older than Verochka and all the nannies and wet nurses considered them betrothed when they were still playing tag on the paths of Petersburg's Summer Garden. This attitude, however, was held not only by the gossips in the servants' quarters but by everyone belonging to the Skalon-Tolbuzin circle as well. The two children were inseparable. As they grew up, the attentions Sergei lavished on Verochka left no doubt as to his feelings. Verochka, too, could not conceive of the future without Sergei Tolbuzin. Not that she gave much thought to that secure, predictable future that could not hold any surprises. She saw herself fated to be

a happy wife, mother of beautiful children, mistress of a hospitable home open to everyone. Why indeed should she waste her thoughts on a future whose ideal order was assured by Sergei Tolbuzin's wholesomeness and integrity? And when this particular summer turned everything topsy-turvy, when flowers and plants revolted, when the order established by God Himself was defied, Verochka was not averse to being a part of the general chaos if but for a time.

But life, with uninvited solicitude, removed her from the confusion surrounding her, put her, as it were, in her own place. Not only did Mitya, in defiance of her hopes (which could not be said to be ill-founded), fall in love with somebody else, but this somebody else had to be the sister of the boy she was expected to marry. Her fate was sealed. What a dreary prospect the future presented in the persons of two devoted couples! Could anything be more sickeningly commonplace?

The presence of Mitya Ziloti always enhanced the romantic atmosphere at the country house. He resembled his older brother—was just as tall and clear-eyed and had the same high brow and smooth tanned skin. But Alexander Ilyich's hair was thinning already, he was a maestro, father of a family, a hen-pecked husband whose feeble but insistent efforts to resist the pecking proved futile. On the other hand young, free, independent Mitya, despite a charming shyness, fairly buzzed with all-conquering power. The young people were always ready to talk about love, especially in the evenings, when at last the unrelenting pianos fell silent, when everything that could be eaten was eaten and all that could be drunk was drunk, when all lessons were learnt and all lectures read, when the modest recreations summer offered had been indulged in, when Missochka put off the strict airs of a governess donned in the daytime and became a simple and delightful young lady; then the quiet hour set in, the hour of intimacy, of freedom from inhibitions, when secret thoughts (often subconscious) and hidden feelings were confessed.

Oddly enough, Sergei Rachmaninov, absorbed as he was in musical pursuits, was able to grasp what was going on around him. Probably his hypersensitive ear caught bits of conversation, whisperings, confessions, bursts of

laughter, peremptory calls—all the music of holiday life. That very evening, while Tatusha was pestering Mitya Ziloti about whether he believed in eternal love or not (Mitya only blushed, puffed, blinked his long eyelashes and made unintelligible sounds), Sergei, in the nasal voice he so annoyingly adopted, held forth on the subject of dynastic marriages. At first Verochka was too depressed by Mitya's betrayal to pay any attention, but presently she became aware that Sergei was throwing stones in *her* backyard. A fine thing it was, said Sergei, that the Russian aristocracy had adopted the royal tradition of marrying dynasty to dynasty; for example, we see how Infanta Flibbertigibbet had been betrothed (even before weaned), to Prince Tolbuzin (even before he could walk), thereby sealing the union of two of the most powerful houses of Snowland.

"Oh, stop it, Sergei Vassilyevich! We've heard all that before," said Verochka testily, but she did not really feel testy at all.

Clowning though he was, Sergei Rachmaninov's harangue declared an irrefutable truth: Verochka's immunity to the whims of fate. Let Mitya cover the whole birch trunk with Nina Tolbuzina's initials if he dared after making all those false advances to herself; she, Verochka, had a true, loyal friend whose soul was crystal-clear and on whose arm she could always lean. That made her invulnerable.

Rachmaninov, however, had not exhausted the theme:

"But of what value are all these august plans if suddenly in the faithless heart of the Infanta should flare up a passion for an unknown wanderer, a second Casanova?" (An obvious allusion to the Italian name of Ziloti.)

"You are insufferable, Sergei Vassilyevich!"

Verochka said this just to say something. The thing that interested her was how Mitya would take it. He squirmed and smiled oddly and threw her such flaming glances that it was hard to believe he had declared his love for another on the birch tree. Verochka's frail heart grew as heavy as lead and for the first time at Ivanovka she was glad when the "sitting" was over and Tatusha drew herself up like a grande dame and announced in a pompous tone: "Another day is over. Each golden day is precious; appreciate them, there are not many left."

This foolish mentor-like phrase veiled Tatusha's regret that she had to go to her mother's rooms while Verochka, Lelya and Missochka, whose bedrooms were out of the range of the mother's stern eye, could go on taking a moon-bath on the balcony. It seemed being a grown-up was not always an advantage.

On their way to the annexe they saw Alexander Ilyich leaning out of a second-storey window. He was wearing an unbuttoned house-coat and smoking.

"Come downstairs and join us! " called out Mitya.

It was as if a bass string of the piano had snapped. Alexander Ilyich instantly drew back and they heard water being poured into a glass and his low placating coo.

"Poor Vera Pavlovna!" said Sergei Rachmaninov gravely. "Another sun stroke!"

"Poor Alexander! " sighed Mitya so softly that only Verochka heard him.

Mitya and Sergei waited until the girls appeared on the balcony, when they saluted them with imaginary swords and strode off. Both boys were tall, thin and well-built and their elongated shadows stretched across the yard to the lilac at the edge of the Old Park. The full bright moon shed light all round, but the moon itself could not be seen from the balcony; it was hidden by a corner of the roof.

Verochka was thinking that Nina Tolbuzina was far away in the Novgorod gubernia and it would be a long time before Mitya would see her. She, Verochka, must ask the good gods to make Mitya stop thinking of her; Nina would never understand him as certain other of his friends did. In just what respect the rather simple Mitya was in need of being understood was a matter Verochka did not elucidate, she only knew that the heroines of her favourite novels spoke of their beaux in such terms. Verochka raised her face to the star-bedecked sky that seemed to be pulsating as if breathing, and prayed that Mitya might be enlightened.

A strong, warm, heavy scent of lilac was wafted from the Old Park. It advanced in a strong resilient wave that swirled round and engulfed her and filled her with a sweet giddiness that almost made her swoon. Weak and languid, she made her way to her bedroom.

On the following day she wrote in her diary: "My heart did not deceive me. Yesterday's hope has been fulfilled. Today Tatusha received a letter from Olga Lanting, saying: 'Tell Mitya that his father told me who he was in love with: your sister Verochka! ' Heavens, what self-control it took for me to conceal my joy and look indifferent when those words were read to me! My lips insisted on curving in a blissful smile and I had to turn away. Tatusha called Mitya and showed him the letter. Unfortunately he had his back to me as he read it and I could not see the expression of his face. 'How does father know?' was his only comment. 'You probably wrote to him,' replied Tatusha, and added: 'I must say I am *exceedingly* grateful to you for using me as a screen.' In other words, she thought he was wooing her and is terribly disappointed. Poor Tatusha! I thought. They went out and I remained sitting in the armchair at the dining-room window thinking all sorts of nice thoughts until Missochka called me for an English dictation. Mercy me, how many mistakes I made! Missochka couldn't imagine why I was so careless. I watched Mitya all day long but had not a single chance to be alone with him."

Verochka's joy knew no bounds. She carried it about with her as one carries a brimming cup, afraid of stumbling and spilling it. She did not go to the park, nor take part in the rowing on the lake, nor participate in any of the other recreations of the day; all the noise and excitement of the world about her, such as Vera Pavlovna's usual fainting spell, or the panic that seized Alexander Ilyich when he cut himself while shaving, reached her as from far away, without intruding upon her deep preoccupation. She hardly noticed when Mitya Ziloti went away, a thing which greatly surprised Tatusha; even that could not distract her!

Evening found her in intimate conversation with Sergei Rachmaninov. She herself could not have said how this came about. After supper Sasha Sattin found a clay whistle and began playing the folk song *Akulina* on it. At first everybody found this amusing but in time it got on their nerves. Rachmaninov asked him to switch to Triquet's* couplets, but Sasha could not play them and

* From Pyotr Tchaikovsky's opera *Evgeni Onegin*—*Tr.*

returned to *Akulina*. Seeing that he was rousing everybody's ire, he doubled his efforts till the veins stood out on his forehead. Tatusha withered the player with a look, rested her head on the high back of the bench, shut her eyes and retired into herself; Natasha softly hissed with rage; Lelya let out peals of laughter, poked her finger into Sasha's ribs and kept saying, "You idiot! You idiot! "; Sergei Rachmaninov waved his enormous hands and called the wrath of the gods down upon this desecrator of music; Verochka, still true to her new precious mood, got up softly and went away carrying the overflowing cup.

She found a mossy bench under a lilac bush, sat down on it and, with an indulgent laugh at such childishness, recalled how she had drunk the lilac wine. It was hard to believe she had done this only two mornings before. What changes had occurred since then! She had lived a whole life, had learned what it meant to love and be loved, had become mature, almost old. Older than Tatusha, at least, who felt the need of captivating everybody and of turning all the boys into her slaves and was unable to conceal her chagrin and displeasure when she failed to do so. Verochka had no such aggressive aspirations. It was sufficient for her to be loved by one person, the person of her choice (not including Sergei Tolbuzin, of course; he didn't count).

"May I join you, Flibbertigibbet? " Without waiting for an answer, Sergei flopped down beside her on the bench, almost upsetting it.

Conversation passed from Sasha and his clay whistle to bad music in general, as well as to unnecessary music, and Verochka remarked on the stupidity of grown-ups who insisted that every young lady ought to learn to play the piano.

"Why, none of us except Tatusha has the least musical talent and still we are forced to drum on the piano a certain number of hours every day, and that in the same house with Ziloti and you, Sergei! You can't beat people into becoming musicians. In the end they'll only come to hate the music they would otherwise enjoy."

"Natasha isn't without talent," objected Rachmaninov. "She's quite capable."

"Oh, stop it, Sergei Vassilyevich. You're always

saying such things. Do you think nobody hears her whimpering when you give her lessons? "

"I'm a bad teacher."

"That's not so. She's the incapable one. Why should they torture the child? "

"The child? You're wonderful, Flibbertigibbet. How much older are you—two years? "

"That doesn't matter," said Verochka in exasperation. "The thing is I *am* older."

"Why, you're very ill-natured," said Rachmaninov in astonishment. "I'm afraid you don't love Natasha."

Verochka herself could not have said why she had made such a vehement attack on Natasha's doubtlessly feeble efforts (after all, what did it matter to her?) and had been so piqued by the reference to her age. That, of course, was in some way connected with the change that had taken place in her so recently. She wanted everything to be frank, above-board, truthful.... But she needn't have been so cruel to her dear devoted Natasha with eyes like *boyarina* Morozova's and a rose-bud mouth. Kindliness was more important than petty truths, but if anyone was unkind it was Sergei for saying she did not love Natasha. The tears gushed out of her very heart—her poor, weak heart.

How distressed and discomfited was Rachmaninov on seeing them! His own eyes became moist. He cursed himself for his tactlessness, slipped off the bench on to the ground and on his knees begged Verochka's forgiveness and kissed her hands. Such a thing had never happened to her before. She even stopped crying and, frightened by the thought that her hands must have the summer stains of grass and dirt on them, jerked them away and was even more frightened by the crudeness of the gesture, so she bent down and kissed the top of Sergei's head, knocking her teeth against it as she did so. This caused her heart to stop beating altogether and for a few seconds she was as one dead.

Sergei must be given credit for behaving with supreme tact during these critical seconds. He pretended not to notice the clumsy kiss, and repeated that he regretted what had occurred, but Verochka must not judge him too severely. He didn't know how to conduct himself with young ladies. He had sisters to be sure, but very

little of his time had been spent in their company; first he had been taken to live with his grandmother; then, when he entered the Moscow Conservatoire, he lived with Nikolai Sergeyevich Zverev. The eminent teacher had his quirks, and one of them was that the pupils he took to live in his house were not to go home for holidays. So Sergei grew up and received his education surrounded by boys alone—very good and talented boys, but Verochka must realise that an exclusively male companionship was not conducive to developing the finer, the more delicate, feelings.

Verochka realised it. Suddenly she recalled conversations she had overheard referring to Sergei's difficult home circumstances. His father had left the family after having wasted his own means and those of his wife. Sergei grew up haphazardly, without ever knowing the warmth of the family circle. He steadfastly avoided all reference to this in conversation. One might have concluded that his life lacked nothing but the refining influence of feminine company. The old bachelor Zverev took his pupils to the pub, did not object to their enjoying a glass of vodka, and allowed his language to exceed the bounds of the permissible when he was angry. At this point Sergei caught himself up and began to sing the praises of Zverev, of his boundless kindness to "the Zverev cubs", as the boys chosen to live with him were called. Every evening they accompanied him to his bedroom and sang their goodnight in chorus, otherwise the poor old man could not fall asleep. Verochka, brought up to the strict discipline of her father's Petersburg house, could not share Sergei's admiration of the whims, caprices, absence of order characteristic of Zverev's household and of Moscow life in general.

"If it was so delightful, why did you leave Zverev's house?" asked Verochka.

"What makes you think I left?" asked Sergei.

"You're living with the Sattins, aren't you?"

"Why ... er ... yes. You see I'm quite a monster, quite...."

"Oh, do be serious," said Verochka sharply.

As he attempted to explain his leaving, Verochka detected behind his evasions, circumventions, self-deprecations, and his effusions as to Zverev's incontestible vir-

tues, the simple fact that Sergei wanted to compose, and there was no opportunity to do this in Zverev's spacious house. The teacher not only made no effort to help him, but he opposed composing in principle. So Sergei left. With nowhere to go. The Sattins took him in. The rest of his relations turned their backs on him.

Verochka looked at her cousin in amazement. She knew, of course, that there were people who had nowhere to live, but they were so far removed from anything within her experience that she could not imagine their existence and sufferings. They were not real people to her; they were characters out of books. And here, sitting on the bench beside her, was a person she knew well, even a distant relation, who was homeless. He chose to treat it lightly, calling himself a "wandering musician". But there was truth behind the words. A little shudder passed through Verochka, as if the wind of homelessness had blown upon her. Poor Sergei! Oh, poor, poor Sergei! And how kind and noble he was! In every way he defended that beastly old Zverev, blaming himself for being "quite a monster", the dear! whereas his only fault was that he wanted to write music. Perhaps he really ought not to compose but be content with being a good pianist. Not as good as Ziloti, certainly—Ziloti had God-given talent—but a good professional musician. But that Zverev! A fine teacher, he is! Think of turning out of his house a homeless boy just because he disagreed with him "in principle"!

Rarely is it given a person to go beyond his own limitations. Verochka Skalon, despite her independence of spirit and a fine moral sensitivity, was pre-eminently her father's daughter. Cavalry General Skalon, military historian, Chairman of the Russian Society of Military Historians, had the reputation of being a subtle and severe connoisseur of the arts, especially of music. The leading composers and music critics of the day gathered at his Petersburg home. The general's reputation rested largely on his refusing to recognise talent, to say nothing of genius, in a single contemporary composer. One had to depart from this world before the general would, with a thin, sad smile, admit the gifts of the dear departed. He was much more willing to praise performing artists, although he looked upon them as second-rate, mere vir-

tuosos instead of creative individualities. Verochka, belonging as she did to the second generation, did not go to the extremes her father went to; she was enthralled by Tchaikovsky and paid Rimsky-Korsakov his due, but she shared her father's scepticism in regard to those who wrote music at the Conservatoire. But while talking to Sergei that evening, she was least of all concerned with what sort of music he wrote.

They both were embarrassed by this utterly unexpected exchange of confidences. It was followed by one of those uncomfortable pauses which, because of strain, self-consciousness and uncertainty of conclusions, does more to estrange than unite people. Both of them were glad when Mme Skalon called in a loud voice:

"Children! Time to come home! "

Sergei saved the evening and made it memorable:

"Flibbertigibbet," he said in his former bantering tone, "we've had a nice talk. Now let's drink a toast to friendship in our wine."

"Let's," said Verochka eagerly.

Lilac bushes pressed at their back.

"What's your choice? " asked Rachmaninov.

"White wine."

"Here you are." He bent a heavy cluster towards her. "I prefer red." He strode to an adjoining bush.

"To your health, Vera Dmitrievna! "

"To your health, Sergei Vassilyevich! "

What a pity it's so hard to fall in love with Sergei, Verochka said to herself as she was drowsing off. He's not handsome. He's not ugly, of course; there's an aristocratic leanness about him, and he has kind, thoughtful eyes, and his mouth is well formed even if it is a little too wide. But that absurd big nose on his thin face, and those ridiculous strands of hair hanging down to his shoulders! Well, he may not be very good-looking but there's something distinguished, something meaningful, in his appearance. Even Tatusha remarked that. I can imagine that some girl might prefer Sergei's unattractiveness to Mitya Ziloti's pink-and-white good looks. Natasha, for instance. Sergei's trouble is something else: he's too simple, sincere and open-hearted. There's nothing romantic or mysterious about him. He doesn't know how to smile and say nothing in a vastly significant way as

Mitya does. It's very strange but, talkative as he is, I knew practically nothing about him till this very day. His tongue seems really to have been given to him to hide his thoughts. Maybe he chatters in self-defence. He doesn't want people to know what's going on inside of him so he surrounds himself by a fence of words. I wonder what sort of music he writes. Too bad he's so poor (this word had a special ring for Verochka). It must be awful to be poor.

Verochka chose a convenient moment when Alexander Ziloti was smoking his after-dinner cigarette in a lilac-bordered alley to ask him if Sergei Rachmaninov was a good musician.

"He's a genius! " cried Ziloti, rolling up green eyes flecked with gold.

"Do you mean it? " Verochka thought he was fooling as usual.

"Russia has never produced such a pianist," he declared energetically, adding as a sop to his conscience, "unless it was Anton Rubinstein."

"You mean he's better than you are? " Verochka asked.

"He will be. And very soon. Just take a look at his hands when he plays. Most pianists bang the keys, he sinks his fingers into them as if the ivory was soft and malleable. He bathes his hands in the keyboard."

Verochka was still not convinced.

"Alexander Ilyich, please don't be offended but tell me ... you, as a pianist ... how do you rate yourself? "

"I'm second-best," he responded instantly.

"And who's first? "

"Oh, there's lot of first-raters. Liszt ... the Rubinstein brothers ... and Rachmaninov will be a first-rater."

"And what sort of music does he compose? "

"That's still a secret. I only know it is a piano concerto. But I can tell you one thing: anything Sergei Rachmaninov does in the field of music will be of the very best. Trust this old man. Sergei's a great musician and you're.... Why, you're the most adorable creature on earth! "

A loud moan came from the lilac bushes and with a crackle of honeysuckle Vera Pavlovna fell in a faint of

the path. From where she had been eavesdropping she had patiently endured the musical part of the programme but had collapsed on the last chord....

Verochka came to the sad conclusion that Sergei Rachmaninov was simply impossible. How could one be his friend? He was so whimsical and unstable that one could only shrug one's shoulders.

Just before dinner the girls decided to dress up in *shushpans.* Tambov *shushpans* do not resemble Mordovian *balakhons* nor Ryazan half-*kaftans*; they are a kind of short woollen shirt with a belt and colourful embroidery. All but Tatusha's were dark blue; hers was white trimmed with bright woollen embroidery and spangles. Naturally she, in this special costume, was admired more than anybody else. Vera Pavlovna quickly put an end to her husband's ecstasies and the others had the good taste to subdue theirs—all but Sergei Rachmaninov, who was not to be stopped. He oh'd and ah'd and asked the Mentor to make him a gift of her *shushpan* when the summer was over. "What in the world will you do with it, Sergei?" Tatusha asked coquettishly. "I will wear it and think of you." Such blandishments could have been laughed off, but Tatusha replied languidly, "Will you really?"

Encouraged by her success, Tatusha wished to show that she was not only a Russian beauty but a profound thinker and writer as well, to which end she gave Sergei her novel to read—pages and pages of manuscript in minuscule writing. Served him right; while others were playing or boating or talking gaily he would have to decipher Tatusha's hieroglyphs. He pretended not to be intimidated by the ordeal facing him and twittered like a bird: "Ah, Mentor! Ah, Tuyechka! Why am I not Schnell?" Obviously this was all in fun but it was annoying. He was not like that in the least, so why pretend?

The situation got worse and worse. Tatusha volunteered to help Sergei Vassilyevich with his work on *Sleeping Beauty* (copy the score for him) and they both went off to the billiard room. Verochka could have helped him herself, but—didn't she have to have an English dictation at that very hour! One day Alexander Ziloti had said:

"As certain flowers open only in the sun, so Tatusha's beauty shines forth only in the light of a man's admiration." And sure enough, Tatusha's eyes were shining like stars when she came out of the billiard room. Fortunately Mitya Ziloti arrived just then on another visit.

With Mitya there everything was simpler, calmer and happier. They went cycling and boating and in the evening they all strolled out to the park and sat on the fragrant new-mown hay. One day Aunt Sattina thought of a way to keeping the young people busy: she sent them off to weed the orchard. All but Verochka were given hoes; she was given a rake to collect the uprooted weeds. So armed, they marched to the orchard, which was situated on a slope leading down to the lake; their feet seemed to move of themselves and before they knew it the work was done. All faces were aglow—sunburn, it turned out, was more easily acquired at work than at play.

Verochka tied a red kerchief over her hair to keep the wind from blowing it about. This threw Alexander Ziloti into raptures and brought on another of his wife's toothaches. Everyone was used to Vera Pavlovna's seizures and life would have been duller without them. The general atmosphere was relaxed and cheerful, as is usual when people are congenial and nobody demands too much of anybody else.

There were times when Verochka fancied her relations with Mitya left something to be desired. They were not as perfect as they had been when they played together as children in Petersburg's Summer Garden. She promised herself to flirt like anything with him so as to rouse him out of his stuffiness, but she kept putting it off. And then it became known that Mitya had an admirer in their neighbour, an over-ripe young lady named Maria Vladimirovna Komsina. Naturally everybody began to tease him, with Tatusha (a past-master at this sporto) leading the chorus. Mitya blushed, paled, stuttered, cast imploring glances at Verochka in the hope that she would stand up for him, but she, not without chagrin, discovered she did not care. She had not even cared when he went away. He was a darling and his presence added a little excitement to the monotony of their days, but at the same time he distracted her from something

of greater importance. She felt depressed. The lilac which had just been in such rich full bloom was shedding its petals already; all of a sudden summer had grown old.

She was haunted by a strange presentiment: something was about to happen—whether to her alone or to everybody in the house, whether good or bad, joyful or lamentable, she could not say, but something was certain to happen. The present state of balance was not lasting, it was the calm before a storm. Yet she could not communicate her anxiety to anybody, they would not understand.

It all began (as is often the case) with a trifle, with changing Verochka's place at table, so that she sat between Vera Pavlovna and Sergei Rachmaninov. Formerly she had sat next to Sasha, who not only kept up such a steady stream of chatter that she was deaf in her left ear by the time dinner was over, but who also kept stealing bits of food off her plate. She didn't mind this when it was a matter of lamb cutlets or *vareniki* or meat dumplings, but she could not stifle her protests when it was a matter of home-made ice-cream or cherry fluff or chocolate pudding. Her loud angry remarks to Sasha must have reached her aunt's ear, for her place was changed.

The dinner ran its usual slow course (the old servants took their time), but it was pleasant and without the boring formalities typical of town dinners. Sasha was making fun of Shura Yelagina, a little girl whose head had been shaven when she was ill of a fever, when suddenly Aunt Sattina called out Verochka from the other end of the table in a voice so loud that all other voices were silenced.

"Well, Verochka, are you pleased with your new neighbours?"

"I'm very pleased to be sitting next to Vera Pavlovna," murmured the confused Verochka.

"Are you deaf, my dear?" called out Aunt Sattina, and all eyes turned to Verochka. "I said *neighbours*, not neighbour. The young gentleman doesn't bother you, I hope, as that dreadful son of mine did."

Why shouldn't Verochka have said, "No, he doesn't, thank you," and been done with it? But she lost her wits entirely. Why on earth had her aunt broached this subject, and in such a loud voice, and with such mean-

ingful emphasis? Was she offended because of her son? Or was there some other reason? And why was everybody staring at her so? Her cheeks were burning as if a mustard plaster had been applied to each of them, and her vocal chords refused to obey her, she could not utter a sound. Once more came the implacable voice: "I asked you, Verochka, if you were pleased with the gentleman sitting beside you." Verochka seized a heavy jug filled with *kvass* and tipped it over her glass so clumsily that some of the frothy drink spilled on the table-cloth, and then she gulped it down greedily choking, feeling it stream down her chin and neck and between her breasts, and the only thought in her mind was: when would this insufferable dinner end so that she could run to Missochka's room and find the sleeping pills she kept in her bed-table (six of them would do) and rid herself for all time of her cowardly soul, of her shame and humiliation and everything else!

"Shura, cut off some of Sergei's lank locks and make yourself a wig," said Sasha in a teasing voice that was met with a burst of laughter.

Verochka was forgotten. Not for long, of course. Only until dinner was over. Then the questions began: "What happened to our brave little girl? What made her suddenly speechless?" scoffed Tatusha, rolling her sloe-like eyes; Lelya, who was less curious than the others, said, "You poor darling! I couldn't bear to look at you! "; even Missochka, tactful and reserved as she was, could not resist saying, "What happened to you? Tatusha nudged me under the table and said, 'Just look at Verochka, what's the matter with her?'" "What business is it of yours?" Verochka suddenly burst out. "I simply didn't understand what Aunt wanted of me." She knew this did not sound convincing but she didn't care. A great surge of strength welled up within her, blotting out all thought of Missochka's sleeping pills. The only person who did not speak to her of the incident was Natasha Sattina. Could it be that this child with sad eyes and the rose-bud mouth guessed the truth? Guessed what Verochka's trembling hand confided to her diary the following morning?—"Everything's clear! There's not a shadow of doubt about it—I'm in love. If I were to be asked when and how it happened I could not say, I only

know that I love him. And that it came about suddenly and despite my wishes. What will happen now? Am I glad? I don't know. I only know that all night I dreamed about him and it was such joy, such delight, that I am now an entirely different person and a much better one than before. I feel that in one night I have grown up, become wiser, prettier, kinder, and my mind is clear and calm and bright. I am filled with a proud self-confidence...."

True, that proud self-confidence lasted only until Tatusha's first sarcastic remarks and Lelya's bitter rebuke, "That'll teach you not to make fun of your sisters!" (When had she made fun of her sisters?) and the whispering of the governesses as they cast knowing glances in her direction. Verochka found herself running to the wash-stand again and again to cool her flaming cheeks. Her vocal chords obeyed her ever so much better than her blood-vessels, which were much too close to the surface to suit her.

They were the bane of her life—try to have any secrets, however you took yourself in hand, when those accursed vessels kept dousing you with red paint from head to foot!

Verochka felt easier and more relaxed in the company of him who was the innocent cause of her disgrace. Either he really did not understand what had happened on the previous day or he successfully feigned not to understand. His behaviour was so natural, he himself was so cheerful and good-natured, that the hypersensitive barometer of Verochka's feelings—her blood vessels—gave no notice of storm. Sergei helped her square her shoulders, gaze about her boldly and proudly, and be the girl who had made that entry in her diary. Soon her companions realised that their quips and taunts and curiosity made not the slightest impression on Verochka. She had no desire to deny anything; on the contrary, she was ready to confirm the conclusions everyone had drawn, and this disarmed them and shut the mouths of her mockers and made them withdraw.

On Midsummer Night they all gathered in the orchard to read Gogol's spooky story* by the light of an

* Nicolai Gogol's story *Vecher Nakanune Ivana Kupala* (*Midsummer Night*).—Tr.

oil lamp. First Sasha read, but he made such faces that the book was taken away from him. It was given to Lelya, whose reading put everyone to sleep. At last it was given to Tatusha and the intonations of her deep rich voice made the superb tale come to life. Verochka listened with pleasure, but, strangely enough, without being frightened. Insects hovered about the lamp and sometimes a big moth would fly up and join them. Natasha waved a twig above the lamp and chased the big moths away but the little ones kept falling into the flame and being consumed in little flashes.

Almost before Tatusha had finished reading Sasha yawned noisily, like a dog, and went off to fall into "the arms of Morpheus". Sergei, who had long been drumming on his chest with his fingers (which usually indicated he was composing music) also got up and, saying he wanted to work a little before going to bed, disappeared in the darkness. This was all for the best; it freed the girls for the hour of witching, which was drawing near.

When, in the morning, they had chosen the spot in the apple orchard where they were to plait their wreaths and make their wishes, Verochka felt she had as much right as her elder sisters and the governesses to make a wish. But she was now disturbed by a phrase Tatusha had dropped in the morning, to which she had paid no attention at the time. "Make a wish if you like but it won't come true." What had she meant by that? Natasha had refused to take part in the rites because she had no wish to make. "I'm still too young," she said, pursing up her lips. Verochka did have a wish to make and a definite person in mind whom the wish concerned. But what if he did not appear to her in her dream? Was that what Tatusha had had in mind? Was it possible that because she was still so young her feeling for Sergei Rachmaninov could not be serious, was just a figment of a too vivid imagination? How distressing! Perhaps she had better not tempt fate, had better complain of a headache and go to bed without taking part in the ceremony of fortune-telling.

"It's time," announced Tatusha, getting up. "Don't forget the grasses for your wreaths."

Missochka put out the lamp. They were plunged in darkness. Gradually the sky became distinct from the

earth, the crowns of the trees could be seen etched against it, stars appeared in rifts between the clouds, lights flashed in the direction of the big house, and human silhouettes could be discerned and a path glimpsed. In single file the girls crossed the park and the yard.

It was even darker in the orchard, but their eyes were accustomed to the darkness by this time and they easily made their way between the white-washed trunks of the apple-trees, their feet slipping on wind-falls at times.

Verochka knew that her appointed place was beyond the group of old trees at the end of the orchard. Catching the honeyed scent of them, which drowned out all other scents, she resignedly left her friends on the path and found herself in eerie solitude.

When she had taken but a few steps it was as if she were transported to another sphere. How easily one could slip into non-existence here, merge with the darkness, which yet was drenched through and through with a glow coming from some unknown source. She tried to plait her wreath but her fingers were all thumbs. Merciful heavens, what tortures she was enduring for a man who did not even know she loved him! A twig snapped, a shadow loomed, another snap, a rustle, stealthy footsteps. An apple struck the ground with a loud thump and her heart thumped just as loudly. From behind a tree stepped Natasha, shaking the leaves out of her hair.

"May I stay with you?"

Natasha leaned against a heavy bough and drew a sigh as deep and soul-shaking as the sigh of a horse in the night. Poor girl! Who was it—Goethe, perhaps?—who said a ghost never appeared to two people at once? True, no ghost was expected to appear, but would not Natasha's presence break the spell? Still, Verochka had not the heart to send her away. She just turned her back on her and set to work plaiting her wreath, trying to put her friend out of her mind.

She was in her bed now. Having whipped up her pillow like soap-suds and swallowed the bitter pill she had filched from Missochka's room, she was eagerly, determinedly, impatiently trying to fall asleep. Just then the pungent odour of jasmine—not of lilac, but of jasmine—

the pungent odour of high summer, came through the window. Verochka let out a desperate moan and—found herself on one of the walks of the Old Park. It was an early morning; misty rays of sun shot through a birch grove and fell among wild raspberry bushes at the side of the walk, causing a bluish vapour to rise from their leaves. There was something fearful crouching behind the visible aspect of that misty, glistening morning, and she shrank as her fears became concentrated on the form of a man coming slowly towards her from the far end of the walk. She could have run, she could have hidden in the raspberry bushes, she could have stood still at least; instead she went to meet her fate like one condemned. The stranger's form grew appallingly as he advanced, grew to half the size of the trees, to their full size, soared above them and, high up in the whirl of mists and sunrays, lost all definiteness of outline rising higher and higher, shimmering and trembling. Verochka kept walking, or rather gliding, towards it, herself diminishing as the form increased in size. Suddenly an enormous hand reached out and seized her and in a moment of agony she knew her happiness, for this was none other than Sergei Rachmaninov.

Verochka woke up in a cold sweat and with an ache in one arm. She had slept on the arm but she fancied the ache was from Sergei's seizing it in his enormous hand. It had come true! On that magic Midsummer Night her wish had been that her love should come to her, and Sergei had visited her in her dream, as lovers visited their beloved. That was the final test of her heart, her love, her maturity. But some familiar foreboding tinged her night's experience. What did it spring from? Could she be afraid of anyone, so kind and noble as Sergei Rachmaninov? Ah, she knew what it sprang from: Tatiana's dream in *Evgeni Onegin.* This was the passage she loved above all others in the poem, even though it left one cold and trembling with horror. Tatiana's dream about Onegin had been as grim and terrifying as her own. But Sergei was not the least like the hero of Pushkin's poem, so it must be that love itself rather than the object of it was grim and terrifying.

When Tatusha and Lelya rushed up to her after breakfast and asked her who she had dreamed about, she answered calmly:

"Sergei Vassilyevich, of course."

Lelya clapped her hands triumphantly as if she had caught her sister at some mischief, but Tatusha bit her lip and appeared to be displeased.

"What can have displeased our elder sister and mentor?" asked Verochka with feigned humility.

"I dreamed of that toad again," replied Tatusha with a wry smile.

One of her countless admirers had made her a present of a bronze toad and since then she had always dreamed of it on Midsummer Night. Verochka lifted her shoulders in a superior way, a gesture that was noted and checked against her.

Just then they were joined by Sergei Rachmaninov, Sasha, and Mitya Ziloti, the latter having quickly returned from Timofeyevka. What's he doing here, thought Verochka in surprise. She greeted him perfunctorily, as if he had never gone away.

"Ask Verochka who she dreamed about!" cried Lelya.

"Sergei," said Verochka, adding with a cunning glance at her sister, "Sergei Tolbuzin."

"Look at that!" Tatusha said to herself in admiration. "How resourceful the little mind is! Not long ago the slightest thing would make her red as a lobster, and look at her now! She'll soon be a model for all of us!"

"Poor dear Mitya!" cried Sergei with comic distress. Snatching Lelya's parasol from her, he wrote the initials "S.T." in the sand.

Mitya smiled and flapped his long eyelashes but appeared not to believe Verochka.

"And who did our Mentor dream about?"

"A toad," said Tatusha. "A brown pop-eyed tree toad."

"Unfortunate Mentor! Why should you have dreamed of a toad?"

"Because I am unworthy of anything better." The exultant flash of her handsome eyes belied her humble words.

As usual they went for a ride in the droshky that evening. Verochka sat at one end next to Sergei Rachmaninov and was constantly aware of the warmth of his side and bony shoulder. It excited her but he, unfortunately, was completely taken up by Tatusha, who was sit-

ting on his other side. For the first time Verochka had the truth pressed home to her that it is not enough to love; one must be loved in return. When first she realised her feeling for Sergei she was too happy to think of whether or not her love was requited. It was enough that she loved him, breathed the same air he breathed, talked to him, laughed with him, boated and went driving, walked in the park, sat under fragrant hay-stacks without uttering a word but aware all the time of her love for him, of his eyes, lips, hands, his pleasing leanness, his boyish laughter, his joyousness and pensiveness, his mystery. She wanted nothing and demanded nothing of him. Indeed, what could he give her except his existence under one and the same sky? But now Verochka wanted him to respond to her love. Why? She could not have said why, but one thing she knew: love could not be a joy if it was not mutual.

As they jogged along over the bumpy road avoiding big puddles by turning onto the dusty grass of the roadside, Sergei talked without pause to Tatusha. Verochka did not hear what they said but it must have been amusing, for Tatusha kept throwing back her head as she laughed, exposing her long, beautifully moulded neck. It was the laughter heard in Petersburg drawing rooms, where it belonged, and Verochka had often tried to imitate it. But what suited Petersburg drawing rooms was entirely out of place among these fields, gullies and hillsides dotted with wild geranium and pinks and sweet-smelling grasses. Here one ought to behave naturally and not play the part of a society lady. But Tatusha's affectation seemed not to disconcert Sergei in the least.

These two were prevented from becoming completely absorbed in each other by Boy, the horse Natasha was riding. This mettlesome two-year-old was hard to manage; despite all Natasha's efforts to hold it back, it kept running up to the droshky and pushing its grinning, dripping lips into Tatusha's hair. Tatusha was afraid of the horse, besides being annoyed to have her tete-à-tete with Sergei interrupted. She waved Boy off in anger and fright, it flung up its head, cocked an angry bloodshot eye at her, let fly a thread of saliva and again pushed its muzzle into her hair.

"Can't you control this Bucephalus of yours?" Tatusha called out to its inept rider. "He spits like a camel."

Poor Natasha looked flustered and frustrated. She did her best to steer the horse to the side of the road, but the creature simply tossed its head angrily and came back to the cart. Natasha then threw herself back as far as the sidesaddle allowed and pulled on the reins with all her might. This hurt the horse's mouth. It gnashed its teeth in an effort to catch the bit in them and fell back from the droshky. Tatusha was relieved and presently her voluptuous laughter rang out again. Verochka surreptitiously drew a handful of hay from under the rug they were sitting on and tempted the horse with it when her sister was not looking. Used though it was to a diet of oats, this young favourite from the Sattin stables reached out for the dubious dainty. Natasha's feeble hands could not hold him in and he crunched the hay at Tatusha's very ear.

Soon they decided to turn back and the enraged Tatusha insisted that Natasha relinquish her mount to Lelya. Natasha sprang to the ground, Lelya took the reins in the firm hand, Sergei Vassilyevich cupped his hand for her foot and she leaped lightly into the saddle. But scarcely had Lelya pulled on the reins when Boy backed and reared up on his hind legs.

"*Il la tuera, c'est sûr!* " Not even fear for her daughter's safety could spoil Mme Skalon's society manners; her French was impeccable.

In the midst of general panic Sergei seized Boy by the reins and hung upon them until the horse was forced down by the weight of his body. Then he helped Lelya dismount and he himself leaped into the saddle and galloped out into a field. The cries of fright were exchanged for shouts of admiration and a clapping of hands. Verochka alone did not clap, she was too startled by the handsome picture he made. His long hair, eagle nose, leanness and tanned skin transformed him into Osceola, chief of the Seminole Indians. He held himself like a son of the prairie even in the side-saddle, and this when nobody had even surmised he could ride at all.

He drove the horse, wore it out, and brought it back to the droshky drenched with sweat and subdued.

"Why, you're a hero, Sergei! " said Tatusha in her lovely voice and, unpinning the rose at her throat, held it out to him.

He laughed, kissed the rose and put it in the buttonhole of his linen jacket. Verochka sensed that he was flattered by Tatusha's offering. You're a red-skin chief! Hiawatha! Osceola! But all these fine words were not pronounced and Sergei remained under the spell of Tatusha's admiration, Tatusha's rose....

Verochka never dreamed that her elder sister could be such a crude flirt. Every day she donned a different skirt from among those made in the expectation of summer parties at the homes of the local gentry. Sergei Vassilyevich was captivated by these rustling, bright-coloured silk skirts; he was as susceptible to the lure of bright colours as a magpie is to glittering things. It became Tatusha's practice to go boating in the daytime, when Verochka was forbidden to be in the bright sun because of her heart and most of the others were also reluctant to exert themselves in the heat. So Tatusha was always accompanied by her two swains, Sergei and Mitya. When Verochka declined Mitya's services, he became Tatusha's armour-bearer. By this time, however, Tatusha was no longer "Tatusha" nor "Tuyechka" nor "Mentor"; she was "Undine". She always made herself a wreath of white waterlilies to strengthen her resemblance to the mysterious water nymph. The lilies, however, quickly faded and gave off an evil odour and Tatusha threw them away with a shudder. Verochka found some consolation in this, for the white lilies set off the beauty of Tatusha's shiny dark hair wonderfully. Tatusha could have made herself wreaths of sturdy white daisies but she liked being Undine, the mermaid who seduced adoring youths into her water kingdom. Sergei was chivalrous in inventing this flattering nickname for Tatusha, nothing like his "Flibbertigibbet" for poor little Verochka. Tatusha fairly blossomed—her eyes grew brighter, her lips redder, and she was so very beautiful that Verochka was relieved when Sergei went away to visit Mitya for a few days. He sent Tatusha a letter that she made awkward efforts to conceal from Verochka. It was only on Missochka's insistence that she showed it. It began "Dear Undine Dmitrievna" and contained a declaration of love supposedly by Mitya but signed, "because of my cousin's illiteracy" by Rachmaninov. There must have been some-

thing serious behind this foolery or why would Tatusha have tried to hide the letter from Verochka? Things had in fact gone so far that Verochka's sisters tried to spare her. She wrote in her diary: "I could weep with disappointment and despair. How can I hope to compete with a grown-up young lady! How miserable, miserable, miserable I am! I never want to see him again! I tremble to think of his coming back!"

He came back quite soon, accompanied by the inevitable Mitya who, it must be confessed, played a rather pitiable role in this comedy.

"Hullo, Flibbertigibbet, Sasha, Toe-Tripper! " came his strong, lively voice from the porch, indicating that his visit had refreshed him. "Good morning, Missochka. Where's Undine Dmitrievna? "

"Here she is! " cried Tatusha theatrically as she stepped out of the drawing room.

She was wearing a pearl-coloured taffeta skirt with a lace-trimmed black bodice. She must have known Sergei was coming at this hour, thought Verochka. No wonder she looks so triumphant.

Tatusha was indeed delighted; she had not supposed the game she had taken up so half-heartedly would bring her such quick winnings. She had thought Sergei was not indifferent to Verochka's love. It turned out that she, Tatusha, had only to lift her little finger. Without intending to, she had killed two birds with one stone—Sergei and Mitya Ziloti. Heaven knew she had not intended to; Mitya had lost all interest for her as soon as Verochka rejected him. He was an affectionate creature, but weak-willed, shilly-shallying, never knowing what he wanted. As a matter of fact he made up to her only because he saw that Sergei was interested in her. Sergei was a bird of another feather, but even so the conquest turned out to be an easy one. Tatusha admitted to herself that her tactics had lacked subtlety—a little flattery and self-deprecation at the beginning: "How marvellously you play! I'm positively afraid of you! " "You're so very clever, I'm positively afraid of you! "; a few details in the matter of toilette and manners that emphasised her being a grown-up lady (she was, after all, the only one in their company who had come of age, and boys are most susceptible to grown-up ladies). By this time her self-depre-

cation had been supplanted by severity and a strong hand; young men had to be kept on a short, tight leash. Verochka seemed to be taking it hard. Well, she had only got her deserts; what right had she to go around with her nose in the air?

One evening they decided to take a drive to the threshing-floor. They hitched the quiet mare, Rooky, to the cabriolet, and Sergei Vassilyevich, recognised as the best horseman since the incident with Boy, picked up the reins. Since the riders took turns according to age, Verochka had to wait her turn.

At last she climbed up beside Sergei and they set out. Rooky's hoofs drummed over the wooden bridge leading from the big house and pounded softly in the dust of the main road, leaving a long grey plume in the wake of the cabriolet. They turned off the road into the fields and Sergei walked the horse round the threshing-ground, which was almost hidden from sight by clouds of dust and chaff. The English steam thresher made such a din that Rooky rolled his eyes in fright. From time to time a glimpse of peasant faces could be caught through the rising clouds of dust. The men were wearing goggles to protect their eyes, the women had wound shawls round their heads, leaving only a narrow chink to peer through.

After watching the threshing a while (the purpose of the ride was to pay homage to Uncle Sattin's agricultural genius, he being the first landlord in the Tambov gubernia to import a steam thresher) Sergei turned Rooky's head homeward.

"It's all over," breathed Verochka ready to weep.

Rachmaninov turned his head and was startled to see the change so brief a space of time had wrought in her pale face. She was no longer a child, she was a grown woman acquainted with sorrow and suffering. At last he understood all.

"How I would love to carry away my little Flibbertigibbet to the ends of the earth! "

"Oh, do carry me away," moaned Verochka, wringing her hands. "Do, do carry me away, Sergei! "

Late that evening, when Natasha was about to climb into bed, she heard a scratching on her window-pane.

This was a secret signal between her and Verochka. They had agreed to resort to it only in urgent need, for the adjoining room was the bedroom of Natasha's strict mother. Natasha ran to the window in a long white nightgown that made her look like a ghost. She drew back the curtain and saw Verochka standing below, her lifted face lighted by the moon, her fair hair tinged with green, her blue eyes large and dark. Never before had she looked so strangely, so frighteningly beautiful. The violent flutter of Natasha's heart told her why Verochka had come.

"He loves me," whispered Verochka. "Can you believe it? —he loves me! We had it all out. In the lilac bushes."

"Heavens, how lucky you are! " murmured Natasha.

"Thank you, Natasha. You're so good! So kind! I love you so! You're the very best of all my friends! " Verochka threw her handfuls of tenderness scooped out of a bottomless basket.

Rachmaninov pushed his way through the lilac bushes. Of the former glory were left only the withered brown remains that gave off a stale odour. He picked a moist leaf and chewed it. His tongue was stung by a bitterness worse than quinine. He laughed. It was good to have his tongue stung, it would be still better if someone gave him a good whack to bring him back to earth. He brought his big fist down on the back of his head, something seemed to crack and he laughed again. That's right, that's what he wanted. He knew that what had taken place was not a dream, not a fancy, not the fabrication of a mind worn out by frustrated efforts to compose. His piano concerto had not gone forward. Now it would. Now he knew what music was. He had sought it in his surroundings when he ought to have sought it within himself, as part of himself. Now he felt he was of an organ's magnitude; something had taken form within him, had come to a ripeness and was resounding in huge throbbing spaces. There would be music.

A cobweb floated slowly in the air, catching on to lilac branches. Tatusha watched it dreamily. Cobwebs were harbingers of autumn. This summer, which had

ripened slowly and painfully only to burst forth in a sudden festival of bloom, was receding swiftly and prematurely. Well, let it!

Tatusha was sitting on the porch, her tanned face turned to the August sun which, if still hot, was tired and heavy. She felt the heat of its rays but it was deceptive, it would not add to her summer's tan. Tatusha languidly narrowed her eyes and waved a little ivory fan as she reflected, not without satisfaction, that the summer was almost over and soon she would be back in St. Petersburg with its theatres, balls, and interesting people. Here among this juvenile company she herself had become juvenile.

"Sergei! " she heard her young sister Verochka call in a husky voice with a little break in it.

Children, even such big children as her sister, did not know how to modify their voices, they were always shouting injuring their vocal chords, becoming hoarse.

The piano stopped playing in the billiard room and long-legged Sergei, clapping his linen cap to his head, came leaping out like Uncle Sattin's Irish setter. Verochka's mother had strictly forbidden her addressing him by his first name without patronymic but Verochka could not make herself think of him so formally. Good for you! thought Tatusha approvingly but with her full lips twisted in a condescending smile. Just see how she's subdued that mustang! What has become of the fanatic dedication of Ziloti's favourite pupil? His teacher turns out to be much more persevering—true, his wife helps him by not allowing him out of her sight or hearing for a moment. But Rachmaninov, whom you could not tear away from the piano a few days ago, now comes running at her first call.

Young men usually fall in love with girls of their own age or older, sometimes even with mature women. They are almost always attracted by their elders but the fear of being repulsed makes some of them hide their feelings and others give up altogether. To be perfectly honest, it was only because Tatusha was bored and had nothing better to do that she tested the strength of her charms on two youths at once: Mitya Ziloti and Sergei Rachmaninov, both of whom were attractive in very different ways. And with what amazing ease that little

chit of a Verochka had eclipsed her sister! First she had effortlessly conquered Mitya, then she had dropped him for Sergei. Mitya meekly returned to his languid suing of Tatusha but she was no longer interested in him. She had changed her quarry to the same one her sister was after: Rachmaninov. Tatusha secretly recognised (although she disliked admitting it) that Rachmaninov was not so simple to catch. What, then, was the secret of Verochka's success? She was pretty, of course, with a fair-haired blue-eyed Slavonic prettiness that was almost too ideal, like the illustration to an ethnographical handbook: *Russian Type of Beauty.* Tatusha's beauty was more modern, more brilliant and spirited. As for their intellectual attributes—how could a youngster still writing English dictations be compared with the author of a novel that had won the admiration of a number of highly cultivated minds?

The secret lay in Verochka's sincerity, her disarming, captivating sincerity that swept every obstacle away. Therein lay her strength. As compared to her, everybody else was the least bit off key. Her every movement, every gesture, every word was genuine, every note was pure, and Rachmaninov's musical soul divined this unerringly.

God grant her happiness, sighed Tatusha. She loved her sister and was sorry for her because of her weak heart. Still, it was a good thing the summer was over—the summer of her defeat, which she would see was never, never, never repeated!

What happened after this? What always happens—summer was followed by autumn and the Sattin's country house became empty. The Skalon sisters returned to St. Petersburg, Rachmaninov and the Sattins to Moscow. But the flames ignited in Ivanovka did not go out although the two young people rarely saw each other and could express little of their feelings in letters. Verochka was ill most of the time and was taken to fashionable European spas for cures. Sergei Rachmaninov worked unremittingly, moved from pillar to post and suffered the pangs of poverty. The Skalon sisters put their funds together to buy him a coat, for which purpose Verochka smashed a china money-box presented to her in early childhood. The sisters were touched by their own generosity but Tatusha spoiled it all by saying, "It's

very sweet of us to be so kind-hearted, but our cousin is rather pitiful, like a housemaid's son."

They enjoyed another summer together in that same Ivanovka, where with delightful ease they joined the present with the past; two years later they all went to Ignatovka, the Skalons' Nizhni-Novgorod estate, but by that time the "three graces" were all young ladies who tied themselves up in corsets every morning, wore fancy gowns and enormous hats like flower gardens when they ventured out into the sun, and the emaciated Sergei Rachmaninov with his fits of neuralgia looked a mere boy compared to them. By that time Verochka (now Vera Dmitrievna) was quite openly accepted as Sergei Tolbuzin's fiancée. Oh, yes, and Rachmaninov had brilliantly graduated from the Conservatoire with diplomas in two fields, Piano and Composition. His graduation piece, the opera *Aleko*, was staged by the Bolshoi Theatre, many of his compositions were included in the repertoires of eminent soloists, and his own performances were warmly received by the public. But what significance had this according to Skalon standards of a man's worth, social standing and future prospects? Meekly bowing to the implacable forces of her clan, Verochka made not the slightest attempt to oppose decisions made "in high council".

Being a woman of integrity, she burned all of Rachmaninov's letters (more than a hundred) on the eve of her wedding—a purification by fire. But she burned more than sheets of paper covered with tender and jocular, grave and pathetic, joyous and bitter words. She burned her own soul, all that was best in her, all that was most sensitive, responsive and exalted. For some time she was not aware of this. At first, delighting in her status of a grown-up lady, her elegant household, her success in society and her motherhood, she did not doubt that she was living the full and happy life of a woman of her class, however stereotyped it might be. Somehow she overlooked the fact that it is given to few women to enjoy the love of a Rachmaninov in their youth.

It was hard for her to forget him if only for the reason that his music, including music dedicated to herself, was everywhere to be heard. Let General Skalon narrow his eyes as superciliously as he liked, this was wonderful

music and it spoke worlds to Verochka. By and by her handsome home became a sorrowful and empty place for her, her heart ached more painfully with the passing of days and no fashionable Italian or Swiss resort could bring relief.

Rachmaninov's fate was not an easy one either. He enjoyed early triumphs and cruel defeats, as when the fat and phlegmatic Glazunov, unconsciously influenced by Petersburg's antipathy to "the Tchaikovsky school", conducted Rachmaninov's first symphony so limply that it was an immediate failure. As a result Rachmaninov went through a nervous crisis and a crisis in his creative life. He felt he would never compose again. It took him a long time and cost him great effort to overcome his prostration. His life was unsettled, he moved from one furnished room to another, wasted time on giving private lessons, wandered aimlessly about, finding himself at times washed up on shores where he did not belong.

When fortune was at its lowest ebb a woman's form, familiar in every detail yet as if seen for the first time, rose out of the deep shadows and Rachmaninov knew he was saved. Natasha Sattina, the little girl with the rosebud mouth, Verochka's best friend, now a tall, lovely woman with a firm, patient mouth, a woman strong in body and spirit and, most of all, in her utter devotion to the man her heart had chosen when she was but a child—this Natasha Sattina, who had fought through to her happiness in defiance of everybody and everything, now took up her post once and for all at Rachmaninov's side. She was at his side on that bleak February night in 1943, when, at the conclusion of his last concert (the receipts of which, like the receipts of other concerts at that time, he gave to the Red Army, the defenders of Stalingrad), he was too ill to walk off the stage and had to be carried off on a stretcher behind the lowered curtain. On that sad night Natasha Sattina-Rachmaninova, now grey-haired but still tall and strong, heard her husband whisper as he lifted his enormous hands, "Poor dear hands—farewell! "

This was at the end of a long and great life. It was not given to Verochka to live a long life. She had thought she could live as others do, pleasing her husband, educating her children, meeting interesting people,

indulging in music and literature and thus growing old with dignity. She could not do this; it was beyond her power. The only thing within her power was to love Rachmaninov. Deprived of the opportunity to do this, she had nothing to live for. The condition of her heart made escape easy—as easy as opening a clenched fist. She gave herself up to death when she was only thirty-four years old.

In memory of Ivanovka and that strange summer when the lilac wine came to a ferment so late but with such an urgency, Rachmaninov wrote his most tender and moving song, *The Lilac.* There is a wonderful note in it, as heart-rending as a sob. It is the cry of Verochka's soul, snatched by love out of eternity.

VICTOR ASTAFIEV

(b. 1924)

He was born in a Siberian village near Krasnoyarsk, and spent his childhood in the country and in Igarka, a port in the Arctic Circle. After graduating from the railway vocational school in 1942 he volunteered for the front where he was seriously wounded. After the war he worked in Chusovoi in the Urals as a metalworker, unskilled workman, loader and carpenter on the railroad. His first story was published in 1951 in a local newspaper where Astafiev shortly afterwards began work as a literary contributor. In 1959-1961 he studied at the Higher Literary Courses in Moscow. Then he lived for a while in Perm and later moved to Vologda. The first collection of his stories *Until Next Spring* came out in 1953. His long short story, *Theft* (1966), which describes life in a children's home in an isolated provincial town and trenchantly poses the problem of the formation of the human personality, and stories *War Is Rumbling Somewhere* (1967), *The Last Bow,* (1968) and the allegorical novella about love in wartime *The Shepherd and the Shepherdess* (1971), brought him widespread fame. One of Astafiev's critics and biographers described his work as set "in the heart of Russia" and went on to say: "One wants to write about Astafiev in the same pensive way as he writes himself, in simple words, encompassing the scents of the vast taiga, the rustling of the sludge on the Yenisei, the silence of forest lakes—in words attesting to his faith in Soviet man and ineffable tenderness for all living things."

THE FIRST NIGHT BACK

All the same, he had failed to make good the brief, precious minutes so deplorably lost; outer space is no railway! The astronaut knew exactly why those minutes had slipped away so irreparably and irretrievably.

Returning from a test flight to a distant, lifeless planet enveloped in a pall of reddish cloud, he had circled the Moon to admire Earth's sad sister once again and, in conformity with the flight programme, to locate a site where it would be possible to land and assemble an interplanetary refuelling station and laboratory. He was doing his last circuit of the Earth when he was jolted out of his mood of contentment and elation by the sight of swirling black clouds on the video-screen. He realised that he was flying over a country whose heart-shaped tip jutted out into the ocean and which had been the scene of senseless war and bloodshed for many years.

He suddenly recollected that only recently, when the world had been on the brink of another war—a global war which had been averted only thanks to the intel-

ligence and efforts of wise minds—a housewife had written in to thank the Soviet head of a state. She had stressed that wars hit the small nations hardest, and if war broke out, many of them cease to exist....

The astronaut had a strange habit which he had been unable to overcome, although he had fought against it all his life: a compulsion to remember all kinds of details—in this case, the country from which the housewife had written her letter. As a boy, after seeing a familiar face, he would toss in sleepless torment that night, feeling vexed and frustrated until he could recall to mind where and in what circumstances he had first seen the person he had met in the street, or who the actor was whose face had appeared briefly on the screen and in what films he had played. He had not lost this "quirk", as he called it, despite his long and gruelling training; it had remained with him, although it lay hidden deep in his mind. Character can be steeled, but no training will ever eliminate the flaws....

The astronaut swore at himself. Landing orders might come from Earth at any moment, and every nerve had to be on the alert in case it suddenly became necessary to switch over to manual control. But he could not tear his eyes away from the video-screen, trying to remember from what country the housewife had written.

"Denmark! That's it! " he cried, forgetting that his transmitters were switched on.

The engineers seated at the communication and navigational console exchanged astonished glances. One, who talked with a lisp, asked in astonishment:

"What ith the matter? Did the detheleration thignal reach you? "

"Signal received! I'm coming down. I got confused by a woman—blast her! "

"A woman? What woman? "

But the astronaut had no time to explain. While they were puzzling over this down below and while control was asking for details of the astronaut's latest medical readings—which, incidentally, explained nothing, as they were perfectly normal—the automatic guidance station began operating and the descent commenced.

The braking systems were activated by a signal from Earth and the engineers brought the light and graceful

ship in on its descent course, wishing the astronaut a safe landing. Half-sitting, half-lying in the seat, and watching the instruments, Oleg Dmitrievich could tell how rapidly the distance between his spacecraft and the Earth was shrinking as he sped "home". "How much time did I lose? How much? " he wondered in an agony of uncertainty.

Later, his question was answered exactly: two and a half minutes, one tenth of a second. And so instead of touching down in the steppelands of Kazakhstan, with which spacemen were already so familiar, he found himself in the Siberian taiga.

He was not conscious of where and how he landed. A much heavier than usual G-load forced him down into his seat; something squeezed his chest, his head and his legs, and suddenly he could not breathe. He applied his lips to the oxygen sensor, but just then there was a violent jolt, and something pincer-like gripped his leg below the knee. The clamp's bent, he thought.

His actions were now purely mechanical, he couldn't get enough air, he desperately wanted to breathe. His lungs wheezed, he heard himself moaning, he worked his lips convulsively, but he couldn't get any air and he felt his last strength ebbing away. He slowly and feebly raised his hand, felt blindly for the lever, and, straining every muscle in his body and his arm, twisted it into position. Hearing the clicks that followed—one, then another, and then a third, he was overjoyed, for it meant that he was alive! Then, sprawling back in his seat, he listened intently. Were all systems operating?

There was a noise of hornets buzzing punctuated by what sounded like the clicking of beads on a counting frame. He knew from this that the hatch was not jammed after all. He thrust his head towards the opening that had appeared to one side of him. Greyish, curling wisps of frosty air came floating in from outside. The air of Earth, of the taiga, of home! It unlocked his chest. His heart jerked convulsively, spasmodically, and began beating rapidly and joyfully in his breast. His legs were all pins and needles. He let his arms go limp as he breathed the air in deep, greedy gulps. He felt the joy of being alive only physically at first, and it wasn't until later that it formulated itself in the thought: "I'm alive! I'm home! "

He was overcome by the pitiful, completely uncontrollable weakness that follows heavy illness or fainting fits, by an inexplicable remorse that he should have left his home, father and friends for so long. Tears rolled down his cheeks as if he were the returning prodigal son. He could not remember when he had last wept, but he only smiled at his tears and did not wipe them away.

His mind was still clouded; his movements were sluggish and he was too weak even to lift his hand. The tears seemed to unwind the tension of the many days in flight and of that forlorn sense of isolation and neglect that had come over him in the depths of the Universe—even though altitude chambers and other ingenious devices had been used to acclimatise him, but without success, since it's impossible to discount human nature! But these feelings had also gone—as if they had never been. Still unaware of where he had landed and how, he nevertheless felt steadier and more sure of himself. He wanted to step out of the ship onto the ground as soon as possible, to see other human beings, to embrace the first-comer, to bury his face in his shoulder. He could even feel the roughness of the clothes tickling his nose, his forehead and his cheeks, not realising that this went back to those far-off days when, welcoming his father back from the war, he had buried his face in the army greatcoat and his nostrils had caught the suffocating stench of burning and the dank mustiness of earth, and he had realised that this must be the smell of the trenches. And through the odours clinging to the greatcoat he was aware of the barely perceptible warmth of his father's body.

When the astronaut came to his senses, he was sitting on the snow beneath a tree and there was a man in front of him, evidently trying to remove his light spacesuit, fumbling at the collar with inexpert fingers. Their eyes met and the astronaut tried to ask something, but the man raised his hand in warning and the astronaut guessed from his lips that he was saying: "Steady, now steady! "

The astronaut could neither move nor speak, and he shut his eyes resignedly, feeling intuitively that this was a man to be trusted. He felt tired, infernally tired, so tired that it hurt his eyes to look at the snow. And yet he longed to stare and stare at the incredible whiteness of it.

He felt his strength returning gradually, and it must have been some time before he raised his leaden eyelids again.

A fire was burning. A short sheepskin coat had been thrown over him. He was lying on something soft. An earthy, musty smell came wafting towards him. He could feel a fir branch against his cheek. "I smell incence and witchcraft. Forest sprites might have dwelt at the foot of this tree: it's warm, quiet and not at all damp."

"A fir tree! " he thought, remembering the first being on Earth. It was definitely a creature, not a tree; it even stirred in his mind and evoked from his caked lips a clear sigh. The sheepskin gave off the odour of a timber house, a burnt-out Russian stove and tobacco, strong home-grown *makhorka.* The space pilot began to crave for a cigarette. "How stupid! But the sheepskin, oh, the sheepskin! What a wonderful human garment! ... Such a nice smell, and so soft!..."

Gingerly, he turned his head. On the other side of the fire, built up of sticks laid skilfully crosswise, he could see a man in dogskin leggings, a dogskin hat and a check shirt, but one with the old-type of buttoned stand-up collar. He recollected that he had seen the man—ages ago, it seemed—fumbling at the neck of his spacesuit. The other, noticing that the astronaut had moved his head, rose from the tree-stump on which he had been sitting, spat the butt of his home-made cigarette into the fire, and opened wide a twisted mouth framed in ginger stubble streaked with grey.

"How d'ye do, Oleg Dmitrich! " he said.

"How d'you do! " the spaceman mumbled in confusion for some reason, and then he realised that these were the first words he had spoken aloud since his return to Earth. Nice words, too! Always used to wish a person health and good cheer. Wonderful words! He strained to repeat them, but the other signalled with his hands for the astronaut not to move.

"Stay put, stay put! Let *me* have the first word, then it'll be your turn," he continued slowly and gravely. "I'm Zakhar Kuprianovich. I'm a forester. You came right down into my sector, lad. A visitor straight from heaven! I must be in luck. Don't know about you, though. There I am, walking through the forest. Some

hired bums cut a clearing in my sector in the summer, but they'd no idea how to do it, they made a hell of a mess.... So I'm walking along and cussing fit for the whole taiga to hear me, and suddenly I see this samovar coming down from the skies! I nearly pulled off me mitten and crossed meself, like they used to.... And then I suddenly remembered what they'd announced over the radio this morning: our astronaut's supposed to be landing, and then I twigged it: 'Why, it's Oleg Dmitrich dropping in! And so he should!' I think to myself. 'There's been all these astronauts and they've landed everywhere; but why not in Siberia? Belyaev and Leonov* came down in the woods near Perm. But our Siberia's a bit bigger and a bit more noticeable than those woods of theirs, isn't it?'"

"You mean I'm in Siberia?" the spaceman asked.

"You certainly are," said the old man. "Didn't you know?"

Oleg Dmitrievich shook his head dejectedly.

"Well, I'll be blowed! I thought you knew everything and it was all down on your automatic thingummebobs." As he talked, the forester had not been sitting idle. He had plucked a roasted cedar cone out of the fire, had been prising out the nuts, splitting them neatly in half, and placing the kernels on a mitten he had thrown down onto the snow. Suddenly he paused and anxiously inquired: "Oleg Dmitrich, does this mean your comrades don't know where you are, or even if you are still alive?"

The astronaut frowned. "No, they don't.'

Zakhar Kuprianovich clapped his hands to his cheeks in dismay like a peasant woman: "I ought to be shot. Here I've been sitting all this time, smoking and thinking your mates would come in on a helicopter and I'd deliver you up safe and sound. What an idiot I am! What are we to do?" The big man in the dogskin boots stared helplessly around, as if imploring counsel from the silent wall of cedars and firs surrounding them.

The spaceman raised himself on one elbow and, fighting back a slight dizziness, pointed to the sheepskin jacket:

* Vladimir Belyaev and Alexei Leonov were among the first Soviet astronauts.—*Ed.*

"Put that on first and then we'll see what we can do."

"You stay where you are seeing that a demon got you all mixed-up and dumped you in my lap." Without further ado, the old man drew the sheepskin over the astronaut's shoulders as if dealing with a child. Then he picked up the mitten on which the cedar kernels were lying. "They're on the house," he said, pouring them into the spaceman's outstretched hands; but then he had second thoughts: "Are you allowed nuts? After all, you're like those folk in the old legends, you eat the food of the Gods! They showed us on the telly what you ate—like toothpaste. I felt sorry for you...." Zakhar Kuprianovich broke off, engrossed in thought. His bluish-grey eyes, misted by the years, gazed intently into flames. The ginger, wiry tufts of hair straggling out from beneath his hat seemed to writhe in the flickering firelight.

The nuts were oily and tasty. Oleg Dmitrievich had never tried this delicacy before. Feeling his strength flowing into him from the fireglow and from the now pensive forest warden's hospitality, he said unconcernedly:

"It wasn't a demon that got me into this fix, Zakhar Kuprianovich, it was a woman! "

The forester rocked back from the fire.

"A woman? " He stabbed his finger at the sky in superstitious awe. "A woman up there, too? "

The astronaut was licking up the last few nuts and so he merely nodded in confirmation. Then, pointing to the dark hulk of the spaceship from which a slushy trail ran across the snow, he said to the despondent and speechless old forester:

"I must eat something, Zakhar Kuprianovich, and I must take a look at this leg of mine. It hurts."

"Of course, of course," said the forester, coming out of his reverie. "You certainly need some food, but I haven't anything much with me.... How was I to know? " he continued; but he did not budge from his place, feeling about him with both hands, his eyes hidden under the beetling, knitted brows.

"When you get into the ship, press the button marked NZ in the side and the whole thing will open up for you. You'll see a thermos, some packets, and tubes of manna," the spaceman said.

"Are you sure I'm allowed to? " asked Zakhar Kuprianovich in a voice hoarse with tension. Without turning round, he jerked his thumb over his shoulder in the direction of the spaceship. "Strictly forbidden ... military secret, and all that.... How d'you know I'm not a spy? " Zakhar Kuprianovich was apparently startled at this idea, and he even perked up over the fire.

He thrust his chest out and screwed up one eye. He felt very pleased with himself at this moment; but for his mouth twisted by an old wound and his innate sense of fun, would he not be the spitting image of a secret agent? However, the astronaut brought him down to earth by reminding him that spies wore trilbys, broad-shouldered mackintoshes, monocles, had silver-plated teeth, and carried canes concealing a camera and poison tablets. That was something on which he considered himself more or less an expert.

Zakhar Kuprianovich grunted and resolutely went off to the spaceship. He found everything quickly and, on returning, shook his head delightedly.

"That button! Those gadgets! Some machine you've got there, lad! All spick and span inside. How the blazes do you remember everything, eh? " He rapped his forehead with his knuckles as he poured out coffee from the thermos into its screw-top cup. "You've got a head on your shoulders! " Then he added, pointing upwards, as if demonstrating something for his own benefit: "They certainly wouldn't send just anybody up there! "

Zakhar Kuprianovich refused the coffee, but tried the fruit mixture, squeezing a bit out onto the palm of his hand. Before licking it up, he sniffed it, caught up the little purple worm on the tip of his tongue, frowned, seemed to listen to something as he held the mixture in his mouth, swallowed it, and smacked his lips.

"Foo-o-o-d! "

He smoked while waiting for the astronaut to finish his coffee, and then told him to lie back on the bed of branches.

"Let's have a look at the leg. What's wrong with it? I don't think it's broken. You wouldn't be cracking jokes if it was."

Zakhar Kuprianovich pressed firmly on the knee and then the calf, and when the astronaut moaned with pain,

he rose from his haunches and, scratching the back of his head, said:

"We'll have to cut the suit open. A pretty expensive outfit, I shall think, eh?"

"Yes. But it can't be helped. Cut away."

The old man went over to a forked, bent cedar. The astronaut noticed a gun and ammunition belt hanging from a dead branch. It occurred to him again that the forester must be feeling cold in his unbuttoned shirt. But when he saw Zakhar Kuprianovich beside him once again, barrel-chested and red-cheeked, and when he felt the still warm hands on his bare leg, he concluded with relief that this must indeed be one of the real Siberians about whom so much is said and written, but of whom there are no more left than there are of Ussurian tigers in the wilds—a few lone families lost in the forests. Zakhar Kuprianovich bound round the swollen leg tightly with a bandage he had taken from the spaceship's first-aid kit. He said that no great damage seemed to have been done: the ankle had been knocked, the leg was swollen but he was in no condition to walk and would have to stay put till evening.

The spaceman knew that even if he were as fit as a fiddle he couldn't leave the craft until the arrival of the people to whom he had to hand over the ship.

"And what about the evening?" inquired the astronaut. He had to repeat his question: the forester seemed half-asleep and wrapped up in his own thoughts.

"Evening?" The old man jerked upright. The astronaut realised that the forester was on the edge with people because he had once been a victim of acute concussion. "Well, Anton'll be turning up towards sundown," replied Zakhar Kuprianovich, adding, as if he had read the astronaut's thoughts. "Sorry. I get these spells." He tapped his forehead and, clearing his throat, said: "Look, I know it's none of my business, but there's something I just can't understand. Here you are, you've landed safely, thank God, but how come you haven't got any warm clothes with you, or a gun, or victuals, or any other stand-bys? I heard that when Belyaev and Leonov dropped down near Perm, the local folk had to find something for them to wear too. Is that true?"

"But what if I really were a spy?" insisted Zakhar Kuprianovich. "Or still worse, a bandit on the run?"

"That's out of the question, Dad," remarked the astronaut drily and distantly. Then, to smooth over the awkwardness, he added more loudly: "Every gram of weight on board counts, and anyway you can't take everything with you...."

"So that's how it is! Those scientists, they certainly know what's what. Still, they ought to find room for things you'll need on the ground. Or else the horse'll be lost for want of a nail. Remember '71, when three of them died instantly? What grand lads they were! All Russia wept for them...." The old man knitted his brows and continued sadly: "It seems only yesterday: they announced the take-off, and my old lady burst into tears. But why three on Holy Trinity day? ... I could have clouted her one. 'Bird of ill omen! ' I told her."

"You seriously mean she said that? " The astronaut half sat up on the bed of branches, his eyes fixed on the forester in amazement.

"You think I'd tell a lie? My old lady, she's a bit batty, blessed with second sight or something. When I was wounded at the front so badly they thought I'd die, she went down with a fever and didn't get better till I did.... Bunk maybe, but there you are, it almost has you believing in it! On the one hand, there's those high-class scientists, and there's fellows staying in the sky as if it was a boarding house; on the other hand, out here in our taiga you still get superstitious.... But human hearts feel pain and joy the same way. It's true, isn't it? "

"It is, Zakhar Kuprianovich, it is. We wept for those astronauts just as you did." Oleg Dmitrievich paused and shut his eyes. "And what'll come next? When people conquered the seas and the oceans and discovered America, look how many lives it all cost! And that, mind you, was down here at home, on earth.... Up there," and he nodded at the sky, "everything's much more complicated. Up there, it's a dark, silent sea with no horizons and no shores. But there'll be Robinson Crusoes up there too, mind you. Evidently that's man's destiny: through disaster and loss to perfection and discovery."

Zakhar Kuprianovich listened without interrupting, the scowl on his face growing steadily darker; then he

nudged the partly burnt sticks into the fire with the toe of his boot, wrenched his axe out of a cedar tree, split a thick block at one blow, built a pyramid of logs on the fire and shook his head.

"I'll go and get some more wood. You take a nap, if you're not frozen stiff."

"No, I'm warm."

"Well, maybe it isn't so cold when you come to think of it. It was only seven below this morning, and it was even warmer round about noon. It's still November weather. But when it's getting on for Christmas, the cold really clamps down! You needn't stay here then! Nip off to the Crimea! I fought there, you know," explained the forester. "The climate's absolute bliss! Still, I had a hankering to come back here.... Ye-es, that's the way it goes: East or West, home is best! "

"How's Anton going to find us? " interrupted the astronaut, sensing that the forester was in the mood for a long talk. "And who is he? "

"Anton? My own flesh and blood! Jubilee issue: first saw the light on the tenth anniversary of Victory Day. There's no folly like an old man's folly, they say, and so I have to bear my cross. I keep him at home. If I let him go to town, he'd sample all the girls there; he's lively as an eel; and then he'd waste the rest of his life paying maintenance allowances." He shook his head hopelessly and, moving closer, said confidently: "It's forest all round here, nothing but taiga for miles on end, but he still finds some bit of skirt to play around with! At the logging camp or the railway hutment site. Heads straight for 'em like a rutting stag and doesn't care if he has to go sixty miles! I wallop him over and over again, but I can't knock any sense into him...."

Zakhar Kuprianovich spat at the ground near his feet and shuffled off over the still thin carpet of snow towards the forked cedar. The spaceman wondered why the two trunks of the same tree were each of a different colour. The forester knocked with the butt of his hatchet on the drywood trunk, cocked an ear to the trembling that went through the tree from head to foot, and, spitting on his hands and grunting with each swing of the axe began chopping off an ivory-hued branch which looked like a mammoth tusk. Large splinters flew in all directions.

Once he had lopped the deadwood off, the forester hewed off the stump end and cut the rest into smaller pieces which he fed to the fire, though it was blazing brightly without sparks or crackling, as in a stove. The cedar seemed crippled and lopsided without its deadwood twin; there was a gap in it, and it was now possible to see what lay beyond the taiga itself. "There's always a place for everything everywhere," noted the astronaut sadly.

Squatting down on the top of a cedar log, Zakhar Kuprianovich unhurriedly set about rolling himself a cigarette. A few splinters of wood had adhered to his beetling brows and the bridge of his nose was beaded with sweat. In the meantime, Oleg Dmitrievich drank another cup of coffee, squeezed out a tube of protein paste, and wistfully observed: "I'd give anything for a nice piece of crusty rye bread! "

The forester glanced round at him and his lips curved in what was intended as a smile but looked like a sneer.

"So, mister heavenly angel, artificial food's all right for flying on, but you've not so keen on it when it comes to enjoying yourself," he said with a glance up at the sky. "Never mind, I'll soon have a decent spread for you: there'll be bread, and stew, and a drink, too, if it's allowed. In the meantime, though, tell me something, Oleg Dmitrich: when the heliocopter comes, will it need landing strip? I've got some wood ready for a signal fire, if need be."

"Is there a clearing nearby? " the spaceman asked.

"Sure. There's my hayfield just a mile away. If we have to signal, I'll set fire to my stack...."

"Why ruin your hay? Let's try and get to the ship, I've got something much better there to signal with."

"It's up to you," said Zakhar Kuprianovich calmly, offering the astronaut his shoulder. "I'll burn my cottage down if need be."

The astronaut stood up, took a step forward and, gasping with pain, clung to Zakhar Kuprianovich. The forester adroitly grasped him under the arms and led him along, letting him put his full weight on his sound foot only. It looked as if the spaceman was walking unaided, but it was all he could do to keep his feet moving.

A swath had been cut through a clump of young

conifers as if by a tidal wave. One mighty cedar had been completely shorn of its green crown. Sailing head-on into the trunk of another tree, the ship, now tilted sideways, had slithered down it, snapping off the branches and tearing off the bark with its pink underlay and snapping off the ship's sucker-like outer antennae.

"What an idiot I am! " the astronaut cursed himself as he looked at the cedar. "I certainly found the right time to play guessing games! Suppose I'd hit a cliff or a village? "

The snow under and around the craft had been melted down and now the round, heavily veined leaves of asarum, the bright-green stonecrop, and the stunted, greying horsetail were visible along with a profusion of scarlet bilberries, their stiff leaves flattened down on the pale moss. Rotten, pecked cedar cones lay everywhere; blades of grass poked up through the moss; frost-bitten cloudberry stalks with their withering leaves had been torn up by their roots and strewn higgledy-piggledy about under the tree. With only a few remaining leaves shining gold in the tree-tops, the swaying birch coppice that had spread over the nearby ridge, had been thrown into disarray; some firs were huddled together underneath it, the silver-grey underside of their foliage showing.

In the distance, massive mountain peaks could be seen, misty above the tops of the mighty cedars. A distant summit, its crevices viened with snow, steamed like a spaceship before blast-off. Beyond the range, the sun was setting, still bright, but wintry-cold and no longer dazzling. The shadows of the trees were indistinct, and a faint blue shadow was beginning to form by the spaceship. Nutcrackers were croaking discordantly somewhere, and woodpecker was tapping, and a cherry-headed bird perched on top of a fir tree was twittering loudly and clearly, its quivering beak pointing towards the sun.

"Oh my, how good to be alive." Oleg Dmitrievich's heart melted, and he bent down to pick a spray of bilberry. Filled with the dreamy juice of the taiga it sent a cold chill coursing through his veins. With his whole body, and not merely with his sight and his hearing, he could feel his native land, felt it, and suddenly became aware that something was tugging at his throat again. "There it is again! ..." Lifting his face to the sky, he

coughed awkwardly and asked the forester to help him up into the ship.

He handed Zakhar Kuprianovich a flat box and a soft travelling bag with an ingenious fastener, and then cautiously lowered himself to the ground.

After they had walked about ten paces, Oleg Dmitrievich turned round to admire the ship once more and realised that in shape it did, indeed, albeit somewhat remotely, resemble a bulging, narrow-wasted Tula samovar.

Lone ships, reconnaissance ships also serving as experimental laboratories for the new and only recently discovered plasma energy, they were no whim or gimmick of the scientists—they were a vital necessity. In the guts of Mother Earth, usually more politely referred to as the depths, there would soon be nothing left that could be burned or smelted: everything had been dug up and consumed, and the Earth's rivers had been turned into stagnant pools of filth. Once optimistically termed reservoirs and even seas, they still spun the obsolete turbines of the power stations supplying electricity to the smoky, soot-choked cities. But their water could no longer sustain life. The rivers had to be returned to man, the Earth had to be healed and its air, fertility and beauty restored.

Hamlet's "To be or not to be" had compelled the world's scientists to pool their efforts and their brains. They had found salvation from all disaster and hope for the future in a new type of energy that did not burn, explode or threaten to asphyxiate and poison every living thing; the energy locked in the samovar-ship's superdurable waist: something like mercury that, disintegrating into particles, generated impulses of colossal power and then passed in the form of crystals into vacuum chambers, where, resembling tiny balls of mercury again, they combined with other "exhausted" crystals to form a mass once more. In this way, the particles expended in the fission process were fused together again in a thread, or chain—no name had been invented for it yet—of endlessly self-regenerating energy capable of saving all living things on Earth and helping man to break out to other planets....

This discovery was so staggering that there was a general reluctance to mention it at all, let alone announce

it to a terrestrial society in which some sections thought thousands of years ahead, while others still preserved the ancient mentality, exterminating their own kind with fuels and explosives, and tribes dwelling somewhere near the romantic Lake Chad still practised primitive barter.

So much had depended, and still did, on the "samovar" in which the Russian astronaut had landed safely, his mission accomplished. The world's finest brains were waiting with hope and faith—a faith perhaps greater than that with which the ancients had looked forward to the coming of Christ, the deliverer of man from all evils for the return of an ordinary human being, a son of the Earth who had himself yet to comprehend fully the meaning and importance of the job he had done.

"So what do you think of the old rattle-trap?" the spaceman inquired, still looking thoughtfully at the ship.

"A fine old rattle-trap she certainly is, lad!" said Zakhar Kuprianovich. "It must have taken real brains to invent her. But nothing surprises me these days. I saw an AMU on the Siberian highway in 1920, and I was so surprised, I've never been the same since. Look," he continued, helping the astronaut to move up closer to the fire, "there's so much has come up in my time that I've given up trying to keep track of it all: from the rubber wheel and the bike to the razor that goes *bzzz-bzzz!* and that samovar of yours. If I saw a well-made cart, or harness stitched by hand and not by foot, I should think I'd be a darn sight more surprised at that!..."

He lowered the astronaut on to the bed of branches, draped the sheepskin over him, stirred the fire, and lit a cigarette from a glowing brand.

"How's the leg? You'll have to march up to the government, you know. You can't limp, can you?" the forester winked at Oleg Dmitrievich, his wide mouth broadening into a wry grin as he pictured the spaceman making his way unsteadily over the red carpet from the plane to the dais.

"Our doctors will fix it," said the astronaut, squashing his dream. "They can stick on a brand-new leg and nobody's any the wiser!"

Zakhar Kuprianovich tended the fire, settled himself on a log, and planted his feet well apart.

"You're a risky lot! " he said. Oleg Dmitrievich raised his eyebrows inquiringly. "Yes, risky," continued the old man firmly. "You fly off up there," and he pointed his self-rolled cigarette at the sky, "you get all sorts of honours: they decorate you with the Hero's Star and the government welcomes you with handshakes. Then, of course, good living and good pay.... And if one of you gets killed, which God forbid, the family'll be taken good care of, won't it? "

"How else should it be, dad! Anything wrong about that? "

"No, I'm not saying there is. It's only right and proper. After all, you do take risks. But there's something I want to say, Oleg Dmitrich. Only you won't be offended, will you? "

"I'll try not to be."

"Good lad! So you tell me honestly, Oleg Dmitrich: take a soldier, an ordinary soldier, when he'd climbed out of the trenches and was going into the attack.... Now a soldier's got a hell of a sixth sense, and he would know pretty well when he wasn't going to come out of it alive. But what he didn't know for sure was whether he'd get a Christian burial. And another thing: he didn't know what would happen to his family. He didn't think about honour or being decorated, he just did his duty as a soldier, same as he did his job at factory or farm.... So tell me, Oleg Dmitrich, and don't try to get round it, tell me straight: who's more of a hero, you or that poor soldier? "

"There's only one answer to that," replied the astronaut sternly. "We wouldn't be here and neither would our jobs if it hadn't been for that Russian soldier."

Zakhar Kuprianovich gazed into the fire, his lips tightly compressed, but as crooked as ever. After a while, he murmured in a constricted voice:

"Thanks." He paused, cleared his throat, and added, as if in self-justification: "There was a time when they started forgetting all about us soldiers. As if we'd done our duty and that was that! Why, you even felt awkward about saying you'd been at the front and gone through hell in the trenches. Ex-soldiers stopped wearing their medals and locked them away.... It was hard for us to bear when we'd stuck it out all through the war. It

hurt like hell, Oleg Dmitrich, it really hurt like hell.... There now, I've put your conscience to the test, I've asked you a sticky question. Don't take offence...."

"My father was at the front too. In the ranks. A mortar gunner."

"Ah, there you are, now, there you are! " The old man's face cleared and the tone of his voice became more friendly. "Everyone here has suffered from the war. Wherever you look, you'll see someone who fought either at the war front or the labour front. And there's me, old sinner, watching the astronauts on the televisor and thinking: they'll spoil those lads with all the publicity and honours and sweet food.... But you see, I was wrong! Oughtn't to have thought such things. Sorry. And don't tell your missis about our talk."

"Spoilt," reflected the astronaut. Every age has had its spoilt ones and its heroes, but they didn't all get bigheaded; some even felt embarrassed. An old pensioner asked one of the first astronauts a stupid question, and the answer he got has become a byword: "Where it is better to live, on Earth or in Space? " "On Earth, after you've been up in Space!"—and the answer was prompted by embarrassment and exasperation, nothing more.

"I can't tell my wife, Zakhar Kuprianovich, because I'm not married."

"You don't say! That's bad." Scratching his head under his hat, the forester tried to keep things friendly. "Those girls, they'll buzz round you like bees round a honey pot, they'll throw themselves at you and they'll turn your head. You're still young, you're in the money, and you're in the limelight! Yes, they'll turn your head! Keep your wits about you, lad, and don't take just anyone that comes, or you'll get landed with some bit of stuff; you'll regret it! "

Oleg Dmitrievich smiled as he listened to the other's ready, half-mocking advice, and he tried to imagine his father in the forester's place. But it was useless. His father was a shy man who seemed to have lost his way in life and had something about him of the Chekhovian minor official and intellectual, though he had always been industrious and came from a working-class family. The woman dies after the man, they say. But it worked out differently with his parents. While his mother had

been alive, his father had been head of the family and master in the house. But on the eve of the war, a serious illness had carried off his full-cheeked, bustling, lively wife in a matter of only a month or so; his father had at once felt lost and so had the son.

Until he was ten years old, when his father returned from the war, Oleg had been brought up at his Aunt Oksana's place. He had become fed up—fed up with her somehow un-Russian self-righteousness and his sense of not really being one of the family.

But life with his father was much more fun; the two of them got on so well. His father lived as before in the same little seaside town and in the same tiny room with its plywood wall-tiles and nothing on earth would ever make him leave. "When you get married and the grandchildren start arriving ... till then you needn't bother me, son. I like it here. Everybody knows me."

The spaceman smiled, then suddenly thought uneasily: "I only hope they don't tell dad I'm missing. His heart isn't too strong...."

He had once read out one of his father's letters to his friends. The astronauts had been enchanted by its unaffected sincerity, and had spent the whole evening talking about the goodness and unselfishness of the Russian people. The letter had somehow served to dispel their grief and depression. But no sooner had they survived one tragedy, the news of Yuri's death coming like a bolt from the blue, than the entire crew of the "Soyuz" were killed shortly afterwards.... How many more of their brave colleagues would the conquest of space claim? And what a formidable word—conquest!

"Zakhar Kuprianovich, how soon will your Anton be here?"

"Anton?" the forester shrugged and looked across the cedar tops. "Pretty soon. Here, I'll fire a shot or two and he'll show up!" The forester took down his shotgun from the tree, raised it into the air with one hand, and emptied both barrels. He ejected the cartridge cases, reloaded, waited a moment or two, and emptied both barrels again. "He'll be here soon," he added, hooking the gun onto a jutting branch. "But weren't you dozing?"

"I was thinking about my father. He must be worried."

"Of course he must be. I said you took risks, didn't

I? And your mother isn't alive, you say? That means your father has twice as much worry. There you are, going up higher than God Almighty, and he's down here and like to go mad with worry. Oh, you children, whatever makes you do such things? You could send him some news."

"How?"

"Well, there's no telegraph office here, of course. But there's a railway station about sixty kilometres away for anyone that wants it, and from there we can send messages to your old man, your mates and anyone else you like!" Anticipating the astronaut's next question, Zakhar Kuprianovich continued: "My Anton'll be coming home from work any time now and the first thing he'll ask his mum is, 'Where's dad?' and she'll tell him, 'In the woods.' His dad was hit on the napper by a German shell-splinter. There he is, walking along, and suddenly, whack, down he goes. And he just lies there, he knows what's happening round him, but he can't get up. Once in town, I ended up stretched right across the pavement: people were stepping over me, 'Drunk, the son-of-a-bitch!' they were saying.... Out here in the woods, I lie until I get over it. But if I don't turn up at home when I'm expected, Anton finds me; either he brings me to or he just carries me home. He'll be following my tracks right now."

"How can you go out into the taiga when you are liable to pass out at any moment?"

"What else can I do, lad? Lie on the stove all day long? I'd simply wither away and die! There!" he lifted a warning finger. "There he is, the rascal!"

Oleg Dmitrievich listened intently but couldn't hear a sound in the taiga. The few birds were already silent. The shadows of the trees had grown longer and more dense. There was a noise like the popping of cedar nuts in the fire, while a fluffy, tail-like shadow from the fire quivered across the snow. Somewhere above, a woodpecker rapped at a dead tree and also stopped work, puzzled by the evening silence. The winding tracks of squirrels and sables stood out more distinctly on the snow, while the thin layer of white beneath the trees was patched and holed by cones, needles and bright leaves blown from the birch coppice.

An austere peace had settled over the taiga. Dusk was pressing in from every quarter, mingling the shadows of the forest with the forest itself. The taiga's endless silence, like that of outer space, engendered a sense of solitude and isolation: it was as if there was not a soul in the world and only here, by the fire, was some form of life still hanging on. Oleg Dmitrievich shivered, imagining himself all alone in this boundless taiga. What would he have done here and how would he have got through the night? He wouldn't have been able to go anywhere. He would have fired signal rockets and hoped against all hope, a prey to the alarm and the unfathomable, indescribable fear of a man swallowed up in the taiga so vast and inaccessible that even the most sophisticated machinery had still failed to destroy it.

There was a rustle in the firs, the branches swayed, shedding a shower of hoarfrost, and a young man on skis appeared in the glow of the fire. He was wearing a quilted jacket, a squirrel-fur hat thrust on to the back of his head, and a wine-red muffler round his neck. He pulled up sharply by the fire and stared round-eyed at his father and the astronaut by turns.

"This is...."

"But I thought...."

"You thought, you thought...." muttered Zakhar Kuprianovich as he gathered his things up and shoved his tobacco pouch and matches into his pocket.

"No.... I thought.... Is this really Oleg Dmitrievich, then?"

"It is!" announced his father proudly and solemnly. "Sit here with him and have a chat. But give me your jacket and skis!"

The young man took off his skis and jacket, staring at the astronaut as if he could hardly believe his eyes.

"They're looking for you! They figured you must have come down near our pass, but they don't know exactly where. The whole lumbercamp's organising search parties tomorrow."

"Tomorrow," grumbled Zakhar Kuprianovich. "So today the man might just as well rot!"

"Today!" said the son, mimicking his father. "Today they've all been at work and you know it. The manager only just got the telephone call, and by the time they

contacted our sector.... My name's Anton." The young man shook the astronaut firmly by the hand. "Everything okay?"

"Except for the leg...."

"We'll carry you there," replied Anton promptly. "In our arms, if we have to! What are you scratching about there like an old hen for, Dad?"

"Belt up!" snapped Zakhar Kuprianovich. He picked up his sack and turned round on his skis with the agility of a young man. "Mind you don't get on his nerves," he warned. With a powerful thrust, he glided off and the forest swallowed him up instantly.

"He's a tough one!" The astronaut shook his head admiringly and then glanced sideways at Anton with a twinkle in his eye. "He wallops you, so he was telling me."

"A bit," said the lad, frowning and dropping his gaze. "If it were anyone else I'd hit back. But he's my father. Besides, he was badly knocked up in the war...." He pulled a pack of cigarettes out of his pocket and was about to offer the astronaut one, then recollected himself, made an apologetic gesture and lit up, ostentatiously flicking his lighter, ingeniously contrived out of duralumin. There was something very theatrical in the way he lit his cigarette, pursing his lips and blowing aside his forelock in which there were bright specks of sawdust.

"Likes to show off," thought Oleg Dmitrievich with a smile.

The young man's shoulders were broad and firm under the grey sweater that fitted snugly over his sturdy frame. His hands were large and so were his features, but they were well proportioned. His hair was ginger like his father's. There was a hint of mischief in his eyes and his mouth was weak and looked ready to broaden in a grin at any moment.

"This lad's going to be quite a handful for his future wife, and for his officers, too, when he does military service. He'll make the sparks fly," thought Oleg Dmitrievich admiringly without censure and even, perhaps, with a tinge of envy. "I bet he's going to ask me how to become an astronaut!"

Overcoming his shyness, Anton nodded at the now dark sky:

"Feel scared up there?"

"He seems to be taking the long way round," thought the astronaut, and said:

"There wasn't time to feel scared."

"There's something I want to ask you about while dad's away. I'm eighteen, and I'll soon be nineteen. Can I still get to be an astronaut?"

"Here we go! It's out at last! How much more of this am I going to get? They've just about driven our boys crazy with their questions and inquiries. Even old-age pensioners are willing to go out into space as cooks and bottlewashers—anything, just to be taken on...."

"What sort of schooling have you had?"

"Five years."

"Not enough, really. Do you realise what hard work it is for us?"

"Yes. I saw you poor chaps on the telly being chucked about on those swings and in that—what d'you call it?—centrifuge, and I saw you stuck in solitary.... Tough going.... If you're talkative, it must be plain hell!..."

"He has a bit of sense, at least. I'll soon talk him out of it."

"But that's not what matters most, Anton. You've got to work hard every day and you need all the strength you've got—physical, mental and spiritual. You've got to be on your toes all the time and work, work, work.... You really need will-power. Above all, self-discipline!"

Anton looked thoughtful.

"School again, in other words.... And it was agony getting through those five forms. Dad used to turn up every fortnight and give me a good dressing-down. Look, see how big my ears are," Anton lifted his hat and, with a confidential air, revealed one ear. "After seven years of pulling!"

The astronaut burst out laughing. "You mean to say those five forms took you seven years?"

"Almost eight. Then, in the eighth year, father dragged me off back home. And he didn't half raise merry hell! Since, he says, you want an easy time of it, you lazy slob, it's the saw, and the axe for you! Get cracking! There's taiga enough for you and to spare! But I fooled him!" sniggered Anton. "He puts me on a

whipsaw, but I got the hang of a petrol-driven job. I'm a glutton for work, I knock those trees down like ninepins." Then, in a quite different, business-like tone, he said: "Get everything ready: telegrams, messages and so on. Dad'll be here any moment, and I've got to get back to my job."

Zakhar Kuprianovich glided out of the firs with a big sack on his back. "Fit and well, Oleg Dmitrich?" he inquired. "So the chatterbox hasn't bored you to death, then?"

Anton scowled. The forester shrugged off his fir coat, put it round Oleg Dmitrievich's shoulders, tugged out of the sack a pair of well-soled felt boots which he carefully drew onto the astronaut's feet, starting with the injured leg first. He then dug out a wooden flask bound with birch-bark, shook it, and poured some of the contents into a mug.

"Why so little? Grudging it?" Anton craned forward.

His father shoved him out of the way and offered the mug to the spaceman.

"Do you good to warm the cockles, Oleg Dmitrich. Night's coming up," he insisted. "You can have as much as you like later." The astronaut gasped after downing several gulps of pure alcohol, and while he chewed a chunk of warm meat with a crispy crust of home-baked bread—the old man hadn't forgotten!—Zakhar Kuprianovich told Anton what he should do next and how he should go about it.

On his writing pad, which was filled with notes almost from cover to cover, Oleg Dmitrievich scribbled a number of telegrams, addressing one, the shortest, to his father. With a belt round his waist and ready for the journey, Anton stood on his skis, waiting impatiently. Pushing the sheets of paper down the front of his sweater and adjusting his muffler, he said abruptly:

"Well, I'm off. I'll be there in two flicks of a lamb's tail."

"Got the papers safely stowed away?" his father again began giving instructions: "None of your tricks, mind you, get it done properly. Send them the forestry number, the bearings, and describe the place. If the heliocopter comes, it should land on the hayfield. We'll have moved camp to it by morning.... Got all that?"

"Yes, yes! "

"Stop pulling faces when you're being sent on an important errand! " snapped his father. "Now, if the heliocopter comes at night, there'll be a fire in the meadow. Off you go! "

Anton nodded, gave a piercing bandit's whistle, and shot off, leaving a flurry of powdery snow in his wake.

"He's a rascal! He's a menace! " grumbled Zakhar Kuprianovich almost angrily, but there was ill-concealed satisfaction and even affection in his voice. "My old woman, she says: 'Lord save us! What's going to happen next? Oh dear, oh dear! ' she fusses around, doesn't know whether she's coming or going. She smashed a pot of butter. She wanted to come, but she was none too steady on her feet. She's taken her drops. She sent you some milk, though. It's still warm." The forester drew another flask from inside his jacket and handed it to Oleg Dmitrievich.

The astronaut unscrewed the top and drank with relish the milk, warmed up in a Russian stove.

"Thank you! Thank you! It smells of new-mown hay! " His head buzzed slightly and he felt dizzy, but warm and happy. "What about you? Haven't you eaten? "

"Don't you worry about me. Wrap yourself in that coat. The night's turned pretty cold."

"No, I'm warm. I'm fine. That's life, Zakhar Kuprianovich. I'd never met you before, and now you're like one of my own family. I'll never forget you as long as I live. I'll tell my father all about you."

"No need for that.... You're one of us...." Zakhar Kuprianovich blinked with embarrassment, looking at the dark cedars. "I'm not the only one out here, you know ... there's plenty more of us. There's been a law amongst us folks in the taiga ever since the year dot. You'll never see someone passing by on the other side."

A little later, Zakhar Kuprianovich tucked up the astronaut, who was drowsy after the spirits and food, insisting that he take a nap in order to gain strength enough to cope with all the trials that lay ahead.

Basking in this kindly attention, the astronaut lay by the fire, staring at the skies above, irregularly dotted with stars, much like a ploughed field sown by a negli-

gent farmer, he looked up at the nebulae which were dimly discernible in the depths and which from time to time glittered like a sheet of snow; at the round moon rolling from behind the mountain ranges—that eternal travelling companion of lovers and poets, abettor of meetings and partings, destroyer of the blackhearted and the rebellious, of thieves, convicts and vagabonds, protectress of the sick, especially little children, always so frightened of being left alone in the dark.

The sky, stars and moon had been the same in those times too, before he had ever existed, when man had not yet even learned to fly, when he was only on the verge of maturity, had yet to arrive at an understanding of himself and the world, and bowed down to a god as his protector. Afraid of that mysterious infinity, measuring himself against it and trying to placate it, man populated the heavens with divinities in his own likeness and which he could understand.

But there were no gods up there. And the moon had nothing in common with the imaginings of poets and lovers; and infinity was as dark, remote and unfathomable as a dream.

It would be worthwhile sending every man up at least once all by himself into that darkness and emptiness, so that he would realise how good it was to be home, how everything was so marvellously and harmoniously ordered on Earth, how everything was created for life and prosperity. But, for some reason, man used his own clever hands to shatter and destroy this harmony and then had to repair, in agony and anguish, the broken chain of life or die in the attempt.

Oleg Dmitrievich gazed heavenwards with detachment as if he had never even been up there. Now he had landed, he felt like a schoolboy who had come back to his native village home from boarding-school in the city and who, after having been out in the cold, had now taken refuge in the warmth on top of the Russian country stove. Beneath him lay the firm earth, so near and understandable: the earth on which trees, potatoes, grain, berries and mushrooms grew, over which rivers and streams coursed, on which lakes and seas rippled, on which urchins ran barefoot, shouting anything that came into their heads. In this earth lay his own mother, and the many,

many soldiers who had never returned from the war; and, in this earth, those of the astronauts, today's toilers of the Universe, who had embraced death before their time, now slept the unending sleep. The earth is precious for the sad memory that binds the living with the dead.

But there is nothing of that up there....

"I mustn't think about it. I don't want to! I'm not going to! " the spaceman told himself and, with the habit of training, shut out the realities of life; but he was still aware of someone friendly and solicitous beside him; the gay, dancing firelight penetrated his tight-shut eyelids for some time, and he breathed the fragrance of cedar cones and the odour of sweetened dough given off by the sizzling embers.

Night hung over him, vibrant and freezing, and the stars swarmed from one end of the sky to the other. Stars that he had seen looking enormous, like clots of shaggy fire shooting out tongues of flame, were now tiny as before and were back in their usual places. Twinkling and winking at one another, they cast a shimmering radiance onto the Earth and onto the astronaut who was slumbering so trustingly and blissfully by the fire. His protruding, half-parted lips were fringed by the beginnings of a moustache and beard; his eyes were hollow with fatigue.

Out of compassion for the sleep-drugged astronaut, Zakhar Kuprianovich gently woke him only when the sky was beginning to turn pale in the East.

"What were you dreaming about? " he asked. "Moscow? The parade? Or your girl? "

The astronaut stared about him, rubbing his cheek which had been scratched by the fir branches.

"Don't remember. Slept like a log." He yawned and smiled faintly.

The stubble on the forester's face was noticeably tougher and the hairs seemed thicker. His eyes had sunk still deeper and his hat was glazed with the rime of the severe frost that had hushed the entire taiga.

"You must be fed up to the teeth with me," said the astronaut penitently. The forester pretended not to hear and Oleg Dmitrievich did not pursue the point: there are things that one does not talk about or discuss.

The sun had yet to rise above the mountain range.

Everything was still, everything was suspended between night and morning. The blue-grey cedars were spangled with transparent, fragile hoarfrost; only those overhanging the fire were shedding drops of water, and they were dark. In the distance, the mountains, silhouetted against the spreading egg-yolk of the dawn, were beginning to show up more and more distinctly.

A pot with a bilberry leaf swirling around inside it was bubbling on the fire; the damp sticks hissed monotonously in the flames. The snow around was begrimed with soot. The spaceman flexed his foot, rested his weight on it, and limped towards the fire, spreading out his hands.

"That's it, that's it: left, right, left!" chuckled Zakhar Kuprianovich, adding that he had never doubted that it would heal by the wedding day, meaning the ceremonial parade in Moscow. A parade, he said, would put a dead man back on his feet, particularly a dashing officer like him, who seemed specially meant for parades!

Teasing the other in this mild and inoffensive way, Zakhar Kuprianovich poured water out of a mug onto the astronaut's hands and told him to wash his face too, as it wouldn't do for our friend from Outer Space to look scruffy. What could the girls say?

"That's the Siberians for you—nothing but girls on the brain!" The astronaut grinned as he wiped his face on the linen hand-towel that the resourceful forester had also stowed away in his sack. Then they drank bilberry tea smacking their lips loudly—which added to the enjoyment.

"You sleep like a top, lad." Zakhar Kuprianovich's eyes crinkled with amuzement as he sucked the tea, crunching a lump of sugar between his teeth. "You ought to be in the fire brigade!"

"They wouldn't have me. And I wouldn't join anyway, the pay's not so hot," rejoined Oleg Dmitrievich. "I slept soundly because I'm back home, that's why!"

Oleg Dmitrievich was enjoying everything round him: the frosty morning, the roaring fire, the tea with the bitterish, overripe bilberries, and the old man there, rugged on the surface, but kind and jolly underneath.

"Ay, there's no two ways about it, I always say home is the best place in the whole wide world. I know

that from when I was at the front," he murmured as he packed his belongings into the sack.

While they were on their way to the hayfield, the astronaut cheerfully surveyed everything around him, knocked some snow from the branches, pressed it into a ball, sniffed it, and even surreptitiously licked it, as if it were an ice-cream. He paused to listen as the first titmouse began chirruping in the woods, and he tried to spot a squirrel that dropped an empty, clean-picked cone in front of him; but he couldn't see it, although Zakhar Kuprianovich pointed out where it was hiding.

The frost had hammered out a pure and resonant morning. Imperceptibly but firmly, it was moving into the taiga. With every passing minute, the gloomy and hostile taiga grew brighter and more friendly.

Near the hayfield, they came to the beginning of a frost-bitten patch of tall grasses, conspicuous among which were the green, wintering ferns with their tips coiled like snails. The green clumps had been flattened out, and they seemed to float on the snow like frozen jellyfish. Near the brook and steaming hot springs, there was a dense "crookery", as the forester called the tangled mass of bushes with intertwining roots.

A haystack squatted like a fat lady in the middle of the glade, a long pole sticking out of it like a radar antenna. The hayfield had been flattened all over by goats and hares. Here and there on the fringe were cautious roe- and musk-deer tracks, dainty even in the snow. Stags had blundered through, leaving a deep impress in the spongy bank of the stream, kicking up peat mingled with pale angelica and bellwort roots. Animals had also chewed the haystack, scattering their angular droppings all round it. Evidently stringent protective measures had preserved something in this remote taiga.

Along the upper, sunny edge of the hayfield, mountain-ash berries shone like scarlet pennants; closer to the stream, whose presence was marked by the denser deciduous trees, there were bristling clumps of hawthorn, and the belated leaves of the currant bushes tinkled faintly under it. Yellow leaves, torn by the wind from the birches which were warmly tucked away in the windblown fir coppice, lay scattered thinly about on the white snow. Autumn has come early in Siberia but it had

been unduly long one and had completely upset nature's own timing.

The sun had risen above the distant, transparently white mountain peaks. Hazel-grouse began chirruping on the mountain ash; a black-cock clucked somewhere else, and all the birds, rare for that time of year, burst into song.

Bullfinch, linnet and black woodpecker! They were the only ones that Oleg Dmitrievich could recognise, but he was happy nevertheless, delighting in these earthly voices and in the morning. Smiling blissfully, he kept saying over and over again:

"Lord, isn't it wonderful! "

Zakhar Kuprianovich, busy picking the loose wisps of hay out of the stack, chuckled.

"You explore the skies, you go up as high as heaven, but you still talk about the Lord! "

"What's that? Ah, well, you see...." Oleg Dmitrievich was about to say it was just habit and that no new words had been found to express delight, bitterness and pain. However, he had no desire to start a conversation, he just wanted to look and listen, and, lowering himself onto a bundle of the small-leaved, intoxicatingly fragrant taiga hay, he leaned back against the haystack and drank slowly and deeply of the air, looking all around him.

The forester clambered into a patch of bird-cherry, intending to pick a panful. But just as he had pulled down a branch festooned with ruby clusters of frost-glazed berries, there was a roar and a clatter, and a helicopter appeared high up in the sky. It glided over the fields and began aiming its belly at the haystack.

Oleg Dmitrievich lit a flare. It blazed like a Christmas firework, only much bigger, throwing off a profusion of many-coloured sparks. Hardly had it fizzled out in the snow than the helicopter flopped down in the clearing, rocking on its wheels, its propeller blades whirling and stirring up the snow to lay bare the spikes of tough horsetail and sedge beneath.

The blades were still rotating over the helicopter, but after the deafening roar and clatter, all around was silent. The door swung open and Anton jumped down without waiting for the footladder to be lowered, the ends of his

wine-red muffler streaming out behind him, his hat thrust onto the back of his head.

"Everything's been dealt with! I've got the whole Soviet Union on its toes! " he cried, as he embraced the astronaut, explaining that he had fetched the forestry conservation helicopter, and that a special-purpose one was on the way, and that the recovery team would be coming, and heaven knows what more besides!...

"Let go of the man, let go of him, you crazy fool! " interceded Zakhar Kuprianovich.

The local big wigs were milling round the helicopter in indecision: the director of the sawmills with the Party organiser, and the logging camp chief in a peaked cap worthy of a field-marshal. A girl in patent-leather boots and new mini-coat, evidently the representative of the local Komsomols, nervously fidgeted with a bunch of flowers: geraniums, a couple of sickly roses and a luxuriant spray of arbor vitae.

"I wonder where on earth the poor souls dug up the roses?" wondered the astronaut in amazement. "Probably robbed a local gardening enthusiast." Then he recalled a couplet from *Vassili Tyorkin:*

Hides her grief as best she can,
Breaks two eggs into the pan.

The astronaut shook hands with all the local authorities and accepted the bouquet. The girl haltingly launched into a speech of welcome, obviously prepared beforehand, which she had been asked to deliver: "Delighted ... to welcome ... you ... here ... back from .... space probe ... here ... on our ... our wonderful ... on behalf of...."

Oleg Dmitrievich felt as embarrassed as the girl. He kept shifting awkwardly from one foot to the other and then, to get the agony over and done with as quickly as possible, suddenly kissed her on the cheek, completely flustering and dumbfounding the poor girl so that she was unable to carry on with her speech. The director and the Party organiser looked at her reproachfully, but she was clearly not lacking in nerve and, giving the astronaut a broad and dazzling smile, she quickly pulled herself together and kissed him too.

All formality disappeared into thin air. The rehearsed

speeches were forgotten, everybody felt more at ease, and the director of the sawmills, as a man of business, inquired what measures needed taking and what he could do to help the comrade astronaut. But at this point, a man in spectacles tumbled out of the hatch, followed by a lop-eared dog which peed up against one of the helicopter's wheels, sniffed around, caught the scent of a hare and struck out for the trees on the bank, flushed out a dozy leveret there which even the helicopter's roar had failed to rouse after its nocturnal ramblings, and began to chase it round the machine, a mere inch or two behind its rump.

The baby hare, confronted for the first time with human beings, let alone a helicopter, was so bewildered that it tried to take cover in the wheels, mistaking them for undergrowth. Everybody roared with laughter. The man in spectacles, who turned out to be a local schoolmaster with a passion for photography and who had been given strict instructions not to come out of the helicopter and let the astronaut see him before the appropriate moment, did not panic, but clicked away with his camera, running round the machine and shouting encouragement to his dog. Later, his photographs were featured in practically all the country's newspapers and magazines, so quick on the uptake he'd been!

While they were amusing themselves, chasing the wretched hare across the glade and trying to get the maddened dog onto its lead, a mighty roar was heard over the taiga. Two helicopters swam into view together from behind the mountains and with confident, unhurried ease touched down side by side at the far end of the meadow, the wash from their rotors beding back the firs and aspens.

Limping slightly, the astronaut went up to them and reported the completion of his mission.

A doctor emerged from one of the helicopters and with him a group of people in motley garb, festooned with leather bags, and with cinecameras and sundry other apparatus at the ready. The cameras buzzed, the lights flashed, and the local photographer, his battered Zorky dangling from his neck, grinned slyly, scratching his dog behind the ears—it had flopped down on its belly at last—and feeding it with lumps of sugar.

Thrusting aside the pressmen, the astronaut pointed out Zakhar Kuprianovich and Anton. Before they knew where they were, father and son were hemmed in on all sides. Bewildered by the barrage of questions and blinded by the photoflashes, the old man attempted to beat a retreat into the forest but was buttonholed by nimble pressmen clutching notebooks. He looked at the astronaut, imploring him with his eyes to extricate him from the jabbering, buzzing, clicking horde. Oleg Dmitrievich laughed as he changed into flying boots and a fur jacket, but didn't lift a finger to help the forester.

A little later, now in fur boots and jerkin, he limped up to the old man and embraced him warmly: "Thanks, Dad! Thanks for everything! " He then turned to hug Anton. The pressmen wrote it all down in their notebooks and photographed the astronaut's farewell to the forester.

Returning his felt boots and sheepskin to the old man, Oleg Dmitrievich embraced him once again and climbed into the helicopter. Turning round in the doorway, he nodded to the forester and his son, and shook his clasped hands in the now traditional astronaut's gesture.

"Mind you pay our respects to your father! " shouted Zakhar Kuprianovich. The astronaut must have heard this, for he shouted back something in the affirmative and nodded.

The door shut, the engines started up, the blades quivered and began to rotate, and suddenly the thin layer of snow was stripped clear off the glade, the grass was laid bare underneath, wisps of hay were plucked from the stack, and sent flying through the air, the firs and cedars were denuded again, and the mountain ash on the edge let fly a shower of scarlet berries. The machine shuddered, lifted off, hovered above the haystack and glided away over the cedar tops and over the darkening mountain peaks. Something on its tiny tail propeller flashed blindingly and seemed to break up into pieces, and then the machine vanished from sight.

Zakhar Kuprianovich wandered aimlessly about the glade, then found himself something to do: he collected the hay into a small stack, pushed it into shape with his foot and said in astonishment:

"Fancy, we had his company for one night—incredible, eh?"

Anton noticed that his father's lips were quivering.

"Now then, don't take it so much to heart! We'll be seeing him on the telly.... He might come here on holiday...."

"You're a fine consolation, you are!" said Zakhar Kuprianovich. "You'd do better to help people!"

The forestry helicopter took off soon afterwards for the nearest railway station where a special train was due. Anton went along with his petrol-driven saw; the lumberjacks had been instructed to cut a path to the station and prepare tractors and sledges for transporting the spaceship.

Meanwhile, on the plane flying to base, the astronaut, freshly shaven and examined by his doctors, reclined in his seat and looked through the latest newspapers. The pressmen tried to bombard him with questions, hoping to get some sort of reaction out of him. He told them about Zakhar Kuprianovich and Anton, asked them not to embarrass the old man with "poetic digressions" and, pleading fatigue, shut his eyes and pretended to doze.

He wan't really dozing, though. He was, as it were, mentally running the reel through in his mind, reviewing his whole flight from beginning to end: the Moon so close that he seemed to be surveying it from a parachute tower; and, far away in the distance, that waif suspended in space, that modestly twinkling planet with the elemental name of Earth, which had once seemed so huge. He remembered it all and again felt—not only with heart and mind, but with his whole body, as he had done when plodding in his heavy spacesuit across the coal-black surface of the strange, enigmatic planet—a sudden, keen nostalgia for that other planet where Russia lay, almost completely covered with green forests whose northern fringe was already tinged with the golden yellow of autumn.

There it was below him now, snow-covered, pure, vast and still. Tucked away somewhere in its depths and stitched to the taiga by the white thread of a footpath, there stood a cottage which had a number on its roof and which cast a shadow all the way across the white

glade. He could see the blazing white-hot fire in the night-bound taiga and the rough-hewn, rugged, wisened old man engrossed in his melancholy thoughts.

"Mind you pay our respects to your father! " He recalled the wise kindness of a man who wanted nothing for himself in this life, a kindness that shone through every word, deed and tired glance.

"Will we be able to keep that goodness of heart into our old age, or will we let silly trivialities get the better of us? Aren't we mechanising ourselves and our feelings?..."

As soon as they landed at Baikonur, Oleg Dmitrievich inquired after his father. His friends, or mates, as the old man had named them, told him that his father was already in Moscow, had somewhere to stay, there was no cause for worry.

After delivering his report to the government, the first and most nerve-racking stage of the welcome at Moscow's Vnukovo Airport, the astronaut kept on the look-out for his father, even while running the gauntlet of handshakes and embraces. When he finally spotted the old man, he actually shouted with joy. His father had, of course, been pushed by the crowd into the background. He was wearing a fashionable new check coat, a Tyrolese hat with a sidebow, and a flashy artificial silk necktie, all the colours of the rainbow and held in place with a snappy tie-pin. His pals had done him proud, dressing up the old man fit to kill! In front of him, her sealskin coat recklessly open and her bosom thrust well forward, stood Oleg's stout, moustached Aunt Oksana, coyly waving a hand in his direction.

Shouldering his way through the crowd and sidestepping his aunt, who kept gushing "Oleg, Oleg! My dear boy! " he went over to his father and embraced him. He heard the war medals jingle underneath the coat which crackled like oilcloth. Dad was in full ceremonial regalia!

Aunt Oksana wriggled through somehow, showering him with kisses and effusively chanting in a broken falsetto: "Oleg, Oleg, my dear boy! "

He suddenly remembered an interview she had given in the editorial offices of a Moscow newspaper: "Brought him up ... till he was ten.... Well-behaved.... Worked hard at school.... Loved pigeons.... Wanted to be a pilot."

To put it bluntly, he hadn't done too well at school. He had too much liberty. And what child does well at school without discipline? As for being fond of pigeons he didn't remember that. But he did recall wanting to follow in his father's footsteps and learn the cabinet-maker's trade. He hadn't thought of flying until he'd actually been called up for the army.

He somehow disentangled himself from his aunt's embrace, pushed his way back towards his father now completely hemmed in by the crowd, and managed to shout to him: "Don't fall behind! "

The old man nodded in assent, and the teardrops were trembling at the corners of his mouth. "How old he looks! I'll never let him go again! " the astronaut told himself, and he went off to pump the hands of the diplomatic corps.

Then he rode through Moscow in an open convertible, saluting the festively arrayed, happily excited crowds with little flags.

People smiled, shouted, and tried to throw flowers right into his car. He caught the bouquets and tossed them back and he could see the joy on the faces of the people, especially the girls, who, on catching a flower, would press it to their lips. He saw tears well up in people's eyes—whether from the flowers' strong scent, the warmth of welcome or out of pure sentiment, he couldn't tell.

Filling his lungs with air, he shouted, his voice carrying across the cheering and the music: "Greetings to you, my friends! "

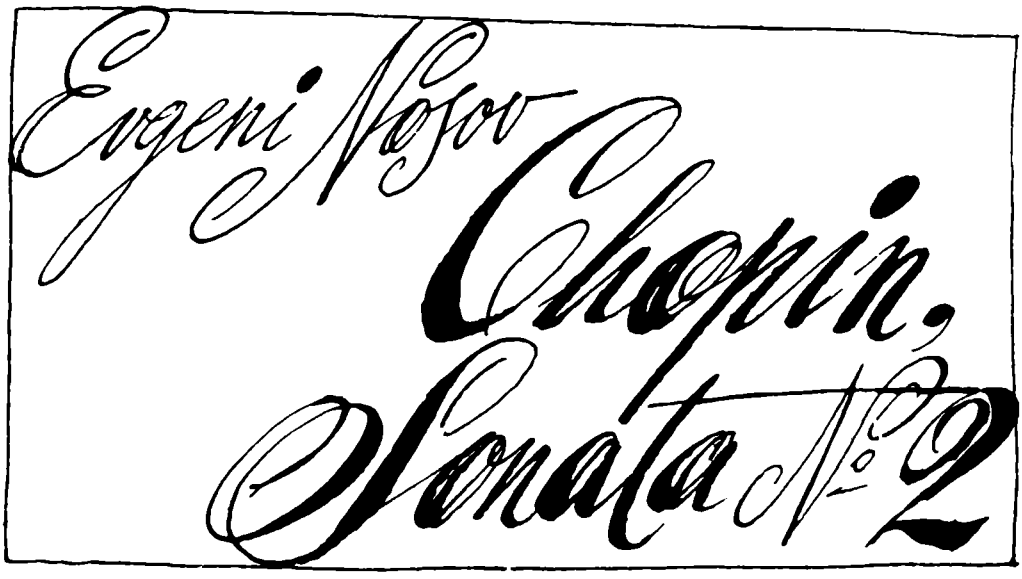
In response came a thunderous "Hurrah!" that rolled after him right up to the Kremlin itself.

EVGENI NOSOV

(b. 1925)

He was born into a large peasant family in the village of Tolmachevo near Kursk. In his life and work Nosov has totally shared the fate of his generation whose youth was marked by the Great Patriotic War: he served at the front in an artillery division, was seriously wounded during the breach of the East Prussian fortifications, sent to hospital, celebrated the Victory in his hospital bed and then gradually returned to life in peacetime. For some time after the war Nosov lived in Kazakhstan and then returned home to the Kursk district. He worked on a newspaper and went on numerous trips as a journalist, collecting material for his future works. He also painted. His first book of stories *On a Fisherman's Path* came out in 1958. Nosov's works are most fully represented in the books *Shores* (1971), and *Rustle the Meadow Grasses* (1973). They were highly acclaimed by the reading public and critics and elevated Nosov to a prominent position among Soviet short-story writers.

Questions of vital importance for the present-day countryside are trenchantly posed in the writer's best stories. With highly poetic lyricism Nosov penetrates subtly into the psychology and "movements of the soul" of the villager. "Nosov's prose," writes Victor Astafiev, his contemporary and friend, "is like thyme, simple in appearance but pure and elevated in essence. It resembles that most ancient crystal-clear tone which once resounded in the legends glorifying young Rus, and still resounds in the works of Bunin and Turgenev, Leskov and Andreyev, Yesenin and Polonsky."



CHOPIN, SONATA No. 2

After the first autumn rains, the dusty grey dirt road turned black, packed smooth from many wheels. The lorry from the sugar-refinery sped along it, its sides hardly rattling, as if it were on an asphalt road. No one had wanted to go in the front with the driver. The whole band, all twelve of them, were in the back sitting on folding seats from the club. There, in the open air, one could smoke, listen to Romka, the horn player, telling his endless funny stories, and lark with the girl-students who had been sent to bring in the sugar beet harvest. The lorry and the shining nickel trumpets attracted the girls working all the way along beside the road. They left their mounds of beet for a moment and, shading their eyes with muddy hands, stared at the snappily dressed musicians.

"Hi, girls! " the boys taunted. "Shall we play you a pas-de-deux, to put you in a good mood for the harvest? "

Romka picked up the French horn on his lap and, his Italian raincoat flapping in the wind, rent the cold

autumn air with shrill staccato from *Swan Lake* "Lata-ta-ta-ta-ta-a-tara-ta-a-a-...."

Sugar beet flew up and hit the lorry, the boys ducked and, laughing, hid their heads behind the tall wooden sides. Pashka grabbed a cymbal to field the beet and to hit it neatly back, tennis-style.

"Come on, easy! " he shouted, excited, straightening his cap which had gone askew. "Wasting the crop like that!"

"Come and give us a hand then," shouted the girls. "Just look at them all dolled up to the nines, the lazy slobs."

The lorry had already passed them, but on both sides of the road new groups of girls caught the note of light-hearted banter and ran up to the road towards the lorry, all pelting it with beet.

"I'm coming down after you! " Pashka laughed. "I'll go catch me that snubnosed wench." He did not even try to hit back the volley of beet, he just shielded his face with the cymbals, while Romka, showing only the tip of his trumpet, went on blowing furiously, egging the girls on: "Ti-ta-ta-ta-ta-ta-a-a-a...."

Suddenly the driver slammed on his brakes and his angry face looked through the window in the back window of the cab.

"Have you gone mad, you lot? They'll smash all the windows! "

Uncle Sasha, the band-leader, who had been standing with his elbows on the driver's cab since they started out from the sugar refinery and who had also had to duck his head during the girls' raid, turned to the boys:

"That's enough, boys. Really, Pavel, is that the way to treat your instrument? "

"Why, what can happen to them? " Pashka, looking puzzled, twirled the nickel-plated cymbals.

Uncle Sasha frowned.

"Put those cymbals down. They're not toys. And you lot there, you calm down too."

"All right, chief, all right! " Reluctantly, the boys went back to their seats and Uncle Sasha grumbled.

"Taking liberties like that. It's not a wedding we're going to. You might realise that."

"All right, give over, the all clear's gone. Peace and friendship! "

The band-leader's speckled grey cap was pulled down over his eyebrows. His violet cheeks, shaved before he set out, had turned blue in the wind. His solo trumpet in its black sateen cover stuck, funnel up, out of the pocket of his stiff raincoat. It had long been his habit to have it always about him.

Romka sat down and began yarning again and the boys gathered round him, held onto each other's shoulders and guffawed, while Uncle Sasha unbuttoned his raincoat, to reveal a little red star, an order, glittering on his jacket. He pulled out a cigarette and lit it behind the cab out of the wind all the while looking aloofly at the road coming to meet him.

An enormous lorry passed them with a muffled roar in a cloud of exhaust. In a back raised with rough planking and in its two trailers, Uncle Sasha caught a glimpse of grey piles of still wet beet. Behind it two blue tip-ups raced past also loaded with beet. Both bore the sign of the state lorry depot on their doors. The state farms were obviously doing their best to deal with this most bothersome of crops while the weather lasted.

Here in this area the Great Russian Plain gradually begins to fold, to prop up the sky with hills which reach up some two hundred metres and more. Some time in the primeval past, a glacier moving down from Scandinavia had failed to make its way through this hilly ridges. The glacier divided into two tongues and crawled on south moving round the flanks.

Perhaps it was not chance that these heights, unconquered by the glacier had, nearly thirty years ago, been the scene of the tremendous battle that Uncle Sasha believed might serve as the starting point of a new chronology. The enemy who had threatened Russia with a new ice age was first stopped between the Dnieper and the Don. Defeated he was thrown down from these heights. In August 1943, when he was still a young lieutenant (he was plain Sasha then) he managed to snatch a few days at home and has been there in time to see the aftermath of the bloody battle on the southern face. Sappers were bringing in the mutilated tanks, both ours and theirs, from the outlying fields to the small station at Prokhorovka which had been the target of an enemy pincer-movement. Dead but still big and menacing, reeking of

burnt diesel oil, lacerated, with great gaping holes in their sides, they stood there, Ferdinands, Tigers, Panthers, side by side with our own self-propelled cannons and Thirty-Fours, the Allies' Churchills, Shermans and unwieldy multi-turreted Victorias. It was a gigantic graveyard for hundreds of tanks—one could get lost among them.

Uncle Sasha was smoking in the wind, looking up at the hill-tops now dreaming under peaceful cornfields while the boys behind him animatedly discussed some big item of small-town news.

"Zoya back?" Pashka's voice was excited. "You're joking!"

"I tell you I saw her," Romka said. "In a skirt—like this! Down to her heels. With a sailor."

"Some frigging boy-friend!"

"Boy-friend? Looked more like a husband. They were choosing a carpet in the department store. I came up: 'Hullo, Zoya,' I said. And she just looked up, and her dark glasses flashed: Not Roma? It can't be. I'd never have known you in a million years."

"She didn't ask after me, did she?" Pashka giggled awkwardly.

"A fat lot she cares about you!"

That time in Prokhorovka, waiting for a car going his way to the sugar refinery, home, Uncle Sasha had walked around among the dead tanks for a long time. The hot August wind wailed among the lowered cannon barrels, sang mournfully like an organ through steel bellies scorching hot from the sun. But even dead and staring through their empty triplex eyes, the tanks seemed to hate each other as before. Uncle Sasha examined the holes, trying to find out how each machine had met its end, till he was hit by a sickening smell from a Tiger whose cannon had been blown off. Apparently our sappers, pulling the tank off the battlefield, had carelessly forgotten to look inside and missed a German corpse—or maybe he had not then been a corpse at the time.

"Bet I can take her off him!" Pashka, impassioned, called out from behind Uncle Sasha. "Bet you I can."

"Who? Zoya, from the sailor? Don't give me that."

"I'll lay you a bottle of cognac. And I'll tell you, you might as well pay for it right now. Zhorik, you're my witness!"

"You haven't a hope in hell," Romka told him. "That sailor's all right. He pulled out his wallet to pay for the carpet—all full of tenners."

"Spit on his tenners. I've only got to crook my finger and she'll come. I was her first, remember."

"You her first? Tell me another! "

That graveyard of tanks is gone. It has been ploughed up and sown, and the scrap-iron of war has long since gone to feed the furnaces. The pockmarks left by mines and high explosive bombs have been filled in and smoothed away. Only in the hills are there the mounds of common graves.

Uncle Sasha, who used to come out into the fields from time to time with his shot-gun, noticed tractor-drivers manoeuvring their ploughs to give a wide berth to a vivid red patch of earth in the field. Shepherds too, taking their flock to graze the stubble, won't let them trample over the isles of grass growing on the graves. Only sometimes an old woman from a nearby village would cross to such a place in short unsure steps, would stand bowing over it in silent thought and, containing her sorrow, begin to weed out the stiff rough grass on a barely raised hillock, leaving only the kindlier, tender herbs—white bindweed, camomile, blue chicory flowers, and, on going, make a sign of the cross over the herbs with her dried-up fingers. Sometimes Uncle Sasha himself might come across an island, where the quails sheltered in the withered autumn grass. Then he would stay a while beside the rusty helmet that crowned the grave. Sometimes he would sit there, tired, alone with his thoughts till the last glow of evening, watching the sunset grieving over the hills, and it would seem to him that here and there the bones buried in this earth were sprouting into white obelisks, and that he himself, who by some miracle had not been laid in such a trench, was also sprouting into one....

"Uncle Sasha! Hey, Uncle Sasha! "

He didn't hear right away. He turned round. Seva, the drummer, was offering him a tumbler. Seva's round face with his straight fringe showing from under his beret, looked worried. The lorry jolted and the vodka splashed onto the piece of salt cucumber he held across the glass with his thumb.

"Why don't you join us?" Ivan, nicknamed Beeflat, invited. Ivan was a tall, awkward lad with whitish down on his cheeks. He played the B-flat trumpet in the band.

Uncle Sasha nearly blew his top. He felt like shouting at Seva: "You lousy pup! Not out of school, your mother's milk hardly dry on your lips! Dawn you, I'll send you out of my band and to the devil!" But he could not stand that kind, long-suffering, clear and boyish gaze, so he relented and only said:

"No thanks, not for me."

"Oh come on, Uncle Sasha! Uncle Sasha!" the boys shouted, vying with one another—Romka, Sokhin the viola, and Belibin, the second tenor.

Uncle Sasha was silent and looked rather put out.

"Don't be like that with us, chief!" Pashka said, offended. "It's so cold, we are all chilled to the marrow." He rubbed his cold hands together. "But if you won't drink, well, we won't either."

"No, boys," said Uncle Sasha firmly. "You do as you please, but I won't breathe vodka into my mouthpiece. I have to play the National Anthem today!" and turned away.

"Well, so have we. We've got to play it too!" for some reason, the boys sounded pleased. "What shall we do, pour it over the side?"

"Shut up, you!" snapped Romka.

"Give me the glass, Sevka!" Pashka said to the drummer, hurt. "Here, give it to me." Looking irritated, he started pouring the vodka back into the narrow neck of the bottle held between his knees, splashing his trousers with it. "Oh, go to hell, the lot of you," he grumbled though not to anyone in particular. "Bloody pious we're all getting. Just you try asking me next time—some hope you'll have."

They rode into the familiar Tikhaya Vorozhba. The village had been rebuilt, and there were no more dreary thatched roofs there now. In front of the houses, inside brightly painted picket-fences, young cherry trees put up their curly purple heads. In the street, on grass that was still green, some boys had marked out goal-posts with two bricks and were enthusiastically kicking a flabby red and blue ball around. Seeing the band lorry, the whole gang gave chase with shouts and whistles. A red-brown

mongrel was still chasing them long after, barking hoarsely, nearly getting under the back wheels. Seva leaned over the side swinging his drumstick to tease the dog.

"Honestly, you're just like a bunch of little kids," Uncle Sasha turned round, annoyed.

He could hardly believe that once, all along this quiet street, in this soft green grass, there had been the clayey, pus-yellow weals of trench brestworks where empty cartridge cases jingled underfoot and dry winds blew the still warm ashes of burnt-out homes away.

Their wheels rumbled over a small rickety bridge. There was a cold glint of water below, sprinkled with fallen leaves, and then suddenly on the other side, on a low hill, some houses came into view. They belonged to the next village, Zapolye, which too had risen anew from ashes.

Turning off the dirt road, they drove through several more villages, and twice crossed small rivers that looked very much alike. So many of these little rivers sprang up here, on these heights of the watershed, and fanned out in all directions; some west, to the Dnieper, others to the Don, still others, joined up to carry their crystal waters to the distant Volga.

After the last village, past the damp, uneven meadow, there was another steep hill ahead. Seen through sparse elder trees, it was steep and bare, black with ploughed autumn fields like all the hills round here. People did not settle here because of the high winds and the lack of water, though in olden times they had built windmills here, windmills that disappeared without a trace in the fires of the last war. No more windmills were built now. Towards autumn though, they would make haystacks and later when the snows came, hungry foxes would catch mice around them. From below it looked as if the stone-cold clouds with their blue-grey bellies were grazing the cheerless ridge. Suddenly in this exposed, windy place, a big motley crowd came into view on the ploughed black earth. In the distance people were milling around silently like ants. Once in a while the windscreen of a parked car flashed brightly in the low sun. Looking at these people moving about silently in deserted fields that had been got ready for the winter, where there could be no work, gathering together for no apparent

reason, the boys in the lorry became unwillingly quiet, realising that this was where the chief was taking them.

They drove in silence along a track up the steep hill, and following a fresh rut turned into the lumpy ploughed field. Behind a haystack a little way from the crowd, were motor-bikes and lorries, bicycles lying on the ground and a white Volga stood beside a forgotten seed drill. The people milled around on a strip of yellow scrub that had been left unploughed, around a low canvas-covered cone, with broken bricks and the cement-splashed planks of the casing scattered at its foot. Schoolchildren in bright pioneer ties and white caps were busily clearing away the bits of debris.

Some men came over to their band lorry right away, and Uncle Sasha recognised them as war veterans who lived in the surrounding villages; he had met them often in the district hospital, when he went up to the medical board for check-ups to see if he was fit to work. He leaned over pleased to shake hands with Stepan Kholodov from Dolgushi, Tikhon Alyapin from the railway junction, with his old comrade Fyodor Babkin, with two or three strangers and with Grandpa Vassili who though lame, was smartly bustling around the lorry.

"Shove down your horns, boys," Grandpa Vassili ordered briskly as he banged the hooks on with his palm to let the back down. He wore an artillery cap, still fresh and hardly worn—he obviously kept it for special occasions. On his chest, against all service regulations, his white and yellow medals clinked on a new bright-blue padded jacket. "Shove the horns down here on the grass, that's right."

He took them, as they passed them over the side, holding the biggest blindingly shiny nickel trumpet gingerly in front of him like a boiling hot samovar. Tikhon and the one-armed Stepan lugged the big drum by its bracing wires, and others took the rest of the instruments over to the obelisk. On the scrub beside it, fir wreaths with bright paper flowers were laid out in a row.

"It's softer on the grass," Grandpa Vassili kept saying, deferentially. "These horns are instruments, valuable things...."

It seemed that someone else was expected besides the band. Some women were sitting under the hay rick, out

of the wind, and children were playing tag around it making a terrific din. Here and there young men strolled by with girls, dressed to the nines. Pashka followed by the rest of the refinery boys, strolled over to the locals as if by accident. After ceremonious handshakes, the boys began to smoke and soon Romka was spinning yarns again, to the accompaniment of approving chuckles.

Several men, obviously collective-farm chairmen, all in short rain-capes and hats, stood aside near the white Volga. The stiff collars of their nylon shirts looked very white against their sun-tanned necks. They too were idly smoking, uneasy in their unaccustomed formal clothes and in the expectation of what was coming.

The veterans stood round beside the carefully laid out trumpets for a while, marvelling at the complicated shiny bends and valves. And then, as always when they got together, they began reminiscing about who had fought and where, how far they had got and where Victory Day had found them.

"I seem to remember that you had a Glory, Fyodor, hadn't you?" Uncle Sasha asked.

Fyodor held out his hands in resignation.

"Couldn't find it anywhere. I went to open the chest, and found all these, but the Glory was gone. My grandson, the little devil, was playing with it. Probably lost it somewhere. I remember he kept pestering me—give it to me to wear for a while, do! Oh well take it, I said. Try it on, be a hero for a bit. And now look what he's done, he's hid it goodness knows where."

"Or he swapped it with his friends for some tin whistle," Grandpa Vassili gave a toothless laugh. "Hasn't a notion of what it cost."

"Well, the medals don't seem as if they were necessary now," said the man in high rubber boots whom Uncle Sasha didn't know. "They even forgot to celebrate Victory Day once, the one day for wearing them. Many got out of the habit, they felt sort of ashamed, like it was showing off. It's only now that they've begun to wear them again."

Embarrassed the old soldiers furtively examined each other's decorations, who had how many and which.

Ivan Kuzmich Selivanov, the chairman of the collective farm, came over to the veterans. He was a corpulent

asthmatic man, and the medals crowded both sides of his coat. There was even a foreign one, a lion swinging on a blue ribbon, and for the lack of space it was nearly on his stomach. Selivanov was breathing heavily and seemed to be puffing and panting under the load.

"Hullo, Guards!" he said in his hoarse deep voice, his kind simple face breaking into a smile. Like the others, he jealously scanned everybody's decorations with his lively grey eyes.

Grandpa Vassili screwed up his eyes roguishly:

"Well, Kuzmich, you're all in a sweat! It's no joke hauling around a load like that. Your chest just isn't big enough, no one's is, however much they stuff themselves."

In some company grandpa would not dare tease the chairman, but here, among the veterans there was a law of brotherhood that eschewed all rank, so the former driver mocked his former regimental commander, now the chairman. Anyway, they all knew that Kuzmich was one of them, not high and mighty, that he wouldn't mind. When it wasn't out of place, naturally.

Ivan Kuzmich did not let Grandpa Vassili have the last word.

"And you, you must have rubbed yours up with coffee grounds. They shine so that you can see them right across the field."

"No, you guessed wrong, Kuzmich," Grandpa Vassili cackled. "It wasn't me. It was my old woman—she did the spit and polish."

The other laughed:

"Honest. It's God's truth. I wanted to go just as I was, but she said it's not right to go before all the people with your decorations looking so dull."

"Good for your old woman!" said Ivan Kuzmich gaily. "That's who should wear the medals, our women!"

"That's true. Honestly, we should divide each one of them in half. One half for us, and the other half for them. For us, because we fought in the trenches, and for them, because they lived and endured and carried on alone on the home front. Which was just as bad as being at the front."

"So it's your old woman made them shine like that?"

"Yes, it was her doing, that's her! But how come she had to?" Grandpa Vassili spread out his hands in a gesture of amazement. "Well, I mean the brass ones, of course. But some are made of silver and still, do you know, they go bad and dull, too. I tried keeping them in a dry place, but all the same, they fade. They don't shine like they used to."

"That's time, grandpa, that's the work of time," said Ivan Kuzmich.

"It's not just the medals! It's us as well. See how worn and spent we look," Fyodor said. "Everyone of us here is grey under the cap."

"Not me, I've lost all mine," Grandpa Vassili pulled off his cap and laughed. "Look, just like my knee. Yet when I got to Budapest I was a real lad!"

"Never mind, Vassili Mikhailovich, you are a hero still." Ivan Kuzmich patted the old man on the shoulder.

"I'm not complaining," said Grandpa Vassili. "I still crow from time to time like an old cock. But some of us have gone."

"True enough lads, time moves on!" Irritated, Tikhon Alyapin pulled his railwayman's cap with the crossed hammer emblem off his grey head, and put it back on. "When we veterans get together like this, it's always one is missing and another can't come. There are so few of us left...."

"So what do you want?" Fyodor said. "You thought if you managed to stay alive, you'd escaped? You didn't. The war is in each one of us. Gnawing at us, eating us away. With one, it's his wounds that get him, with another, it's his chest, yet another suffers with his stomach. They took their toll, those four years...."

Uncle Sasha took out his duralumin cigarette-case and held it out to the group. They all reached for one in silence.

At last the executive committee's can drove up and stopped beside the white Volga, and holding on to his hat, Zasekin himself got out. He, too, wore a clean shirt and tie, but his rough leather boots were muddy. Apparently he'd had to call somewhere on the way, and it had made him a bit late. A district military commissar got out behind him, a lean middle-aged captain, his

waterproof cape done up with short straps. The third was Badeiko, an instructor for DOSAAF (Voluntary Society for Assistance to the Army, Air Force and Navy). Zasekin hurriedly shook hands with the group beside the white Volga, took an anxious look at his watch and made straight for the obelisk, gathering a rapidly thickening crowd in his wake as if with an invisible drag-net. The dashing instructor with the well-groomed whiskers, his camera slung over the shoulder, ran ahead, loudly announcing:

"Comrades, comrades! Come along, come closer! Come along, come along! You women over there by the haystack, too! "

While the people were gathering in a tight circle round the obelisk, Uncle Sasha came over to the boys, who had already picked up their instruments. He pulled a small horn that looked like a pioneers' bugle, out of his pocket, took off the cover, and as always, blew gently, silently into his mouthpiece and tried all the valves. Looking at the sky, the musicians shifted from one foot to the other, shivering in their thin smart raincoats. It was indeed rather cold. Low grey clouds blew over and covered the sun, and it became windy and cheerless on the bare unsheltered hillside.

"Well, then..." Uncle Sasha looked over the lined up band. "As soon as the canvas is taken off, the National Anthem. So don't go wandering off any of you, stay put."

"Stop worrying, chief," Pashka was looking at his reflection in a shining cymbal as if it were a mirror. "We'll blast it out all right."

"Now don't use words like that to me! " Uncle Sasha frowned. "Don't you dash your cymbals too loud either, Pavel. You're always drowning out the others."

"So what's wrong, I play it right. And anyway the music says forte."

"Forte, forte.... You've got to listen to it. You should feel the melody and the whole of the band. But you just bang away, like a watchman at the rail."

Pashka was offended:

"You're always picking on me, chief."

Meanwhile the crowd was quietening down expectantly as the district military commissar came over to the foot of the memorial to open the meeting. He had served

in the district recruiting office for a long time and most of the people knew him, especially the veterans. His lower jaw had been cut by a shell splinter, the bones had not set quite right so his mouth was crooked, which made him look rather gloomy though really he was a quiet, unpretentious man. He had lost his family, his wife and two little girls, at the very beginning of the war while evacuating the fortified district of Shepetovka, and since then he had lived a lonely life with his old mother. One could always see bird cages in his windows with siskins and grey redpolls.

"Friends! " he began, inclining his head and by the force of habit stroking and hiding his misshapen jaw with his hand. "Mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, children, grandchildren! We have all gathered here to honour the memory ... who gave their lives...."

Perhaps under the resonant arch of a great hall, the voice amplified by microphones, it would have sounded exactly right. But here in the middle of an empty field under the boundless autumn skies, the words sounded remote and weak. The crowd stirred, pressing closer, and children, slipping past grown-ups' legs, pushed their way to the front to hear better. And Pashka, hurt, still droned on:

"He's always picking on me. Kurochkin here can't even read music properly, but that doesn't bother him at all...."

"Oh do shut up! " Uncle Sasha turned round, annoyed; he was trying to concentrate, to catch the district commissar's words.

Now and then gusts of wind would tear at a corner of the canvas veiling the obelisk, and drown the speech with loud flapping sounds, so that only snatches of the sentences reached Uncle Sasha.

"...the rains have washed the blood off these hill-tops ... with your own hands you have filled in the trenches and bomb craters, sown the fields with wheat, and now a peaceful sun shines overhead.... But nothing will wash away our grief, heal the wounds in our souls or dull our memory...."

The army commissar, forgetting himself, took his hand off his chin and swung his arm up in the air. A vein under his cheek stood out, and tightened up nervously pulling down the whole right side of his face.

"Well I'm off then. I really mean it," Pashka took a step out of the line.

"Pavel," Uncle Sasha whispered angrily. "Get back to your place."

Pashka was silent, looking stubbornly down at his new boots. Someone turned to look in their direction.

"Get back, I tell you! " repeated the chief again in a whisper.

The boy stared sourly at the field and obeyed. At that moment, Badeiko, the instructor, loudly and indignantly interrupted the district commissar:

"You there, in the back rows! For goodness sake, stop that racket. You might show some respect for other people."

Soon the district commissar ended his speech and stepped back. Badeiko whispered to Zasekin and began to unwind the rope coiled round the cover. The freed canvas filled out like a sail and flapped even more loudly. Badeiko held on clumsily and several men ran up to help him. Then, when the canvas had been tamed and pulled off, everybody saw a grey cement cone, still wet in patches, with a column of names on a yellow metal plaque:

Agapov D. M., private
Anikin S. K., private
Borvenkov V. V., junior sergeant
Fedunets M. S., private
Fomichev V. A., junior sergeant
Garkusha I. S., private
Khodov S. M., sergeant
Ivanov I. P., sergeant

The names were unfamiliar. They had lived so long ago, these men who peeped into the world of today after so many years, a mere jumble of letters on a plaque.

Makhov A. Y., sergeant-major
Mokryakov T. S., private
Murzabekov B., private
Nechitailo Kh. I., private
Nogotkov S. S., junior lieutenant
Nuriev A., private
Obrezkov P. S., private

Uncle Sasha was thinking that his name would have been right after Parfyonov, because Polosukhin begins with a P. Though he would probably not have been layed beside this Parfyonov A. M. On top of him, maybe, or somewhere underneath. Just a matter of luck. They didn't lay you into a common grave in alphabetical order....

People were waving their hands at him, making signs for the band to begin and, coming to, Uncle Sasha hurriedly put his fingers on the valves of his trumpet.

"Three-four-and..." he gave a nod to the boys with his trumpet already at his lips.

The brass exploded in unison. He couldn't hear his own cornet, he felt it tremble under his fingers. He had played the National Anthem hundreds of times since that day at the front when he first learnt it. But again and again when he took up his trumpet to play it, he felt shivery all over. He glanced up at the boys, who were aloof and reserved and suddenly serious, and lowered his eyelids approvingly.

Zasekin was the first to take his hat off and to bow his head. Then hands went up everywhere to pull off caps. Women took the caps off their little boys clinging to their skirts and tousled their hair, then all heads bowed in sorrow. Only the military commissar kept on his service cap. He raised his hand to his crimson cap-band and stood to attention, blinking intently, his fingers shaking at his greying temple.

"...In battle we settled the fate of generations..." Uncle Sasha was thinking the words as he watched Pashka beat out time smoothly with ringing clashes. Well done! He can do anything when he really wants to.

Running his fingers across the valves he listened as he played, remembering the summer of nineteen forty-four near Bykhov, when he had first learnt the National Anthem. Young officers had been summoned to divisional headquarters to hear the tune played on an accordion so that they could teach it to their men. The music had not been easy to pick up, and as they went back the officers had hummed it all the way under their breath, to remember it and take it with them to the trenches. It must have been strange, these officers near the front all humming something in discordant, dissonant voices.

Many had got the tune a bit wrong too, each modifying it his own way, so that at first the soldiers all sang the Anthem differently, one platoon like this, another like that though all of them had the words off by heart.

Uncle Sasha gave the final beat and the music stopped. They hadn't played too badly on the whole. Even Kurochkin, the new boy, had kept time and played his bass with confidence.

"Thank you, lads," the band-leader said, wiping his mouthpiece on the sateen cover. "Well done, all of you!"

"Well, there you are, and you were grumbling all the time before," Pashka flung out the words.

Young Pioneers in white caps were marching two by two through the crowd towards the obelisk, carrying wreaths with black and red bands. A young girl in a red tie, the young Pioneer leader, her obviously dyed chestnut hair piled up on top of her head, led the procession.

She walked ahead solemnly looking at no one, her young face glowed, also solemn, almost severe.

The pedestal was covered in wreaths. Two schoolchildren—a boy and a girl—stood very still on either side and saluted. The rest moved off in formation, the rows clearly marked by their white hats.

The meeting began.

First came Osinkin, the chairman of the collective farm on whose land the memorial stood. A stocky energetic man, his clothes from his stiff new belted plastic coat to his thick-soled shoes creaking like the leaves of a young cabbage brought in out of the frost. He walked up to the pedestal in quick steps to take over from the commissar, took off his hat and looked round at them all with his lively Gypsy eyes. His collective farm was famous for a song-and-dance group whose celebrated *Timonya,* arranged for fifes, pipes and little Ukrainian horns always won first prize at district festivals. The song-and-dance group was Osinkin's passion, he himself was always willing to sing and dance at every opportunity. He was the heart and soul of every big gathering in the district—the Harvest Festival, Tractor-Drivers Day—and he was always a judge at every competition. Nevertheless, Osinkin was a thrifty, even a tight-fisted manager. He never liked to take a chance, or to risk wasting money, and before he bought a new machine for the

farm, a water-sprinkler, say, or some super new grain-dryer, he would find out if one of the neighbouring farms had one and go and see for himself if it was worth having. He always spoke without notes, yet always had impressive figures at his finger-tips—how many hectares were ploughed and ready for the spring sowing, how many litres of milk had been produced or eggs sold to the state; how much silage had been stored away for winter, how much fertiliser sprayed on the fields; figures for income and expenditure, for capital investment, non-distributable funds. In a word, he loved figures and knew just how to present them, so he was always listened to with close attention.

Here, at the unveiling of the monument, they also listened to Osinkin with interest. He was telling about a competition that began during the harvest, how the winner had earned the right to lay the foundation stone for the obelisk, and how as a result their farm had already managed to deliver more than half their sugar beet to the state and how, although they were a long way from the buying centre, their farm had achieved an honourable third in the district.

Uncle Sasha kept staring at the cement cone, trying to find the name where his reading had been interrupted.

Pravednikov G. A., private
Proskurin S. M., private
Pyzhov A. S., lieutenant
Parfyonov A. M., junior sergeant
Rodionov N. I. private

Like everybody else here, Uncle Sasha had not known a single man in the list, yet inexorably the names held his attention.

"...It is too early as yet to sum up," Osinkin went on, "but what we have done so far is not at all bad. It is neither more nor less than thirty-six thousand centners—thirty-six thousand centners of raw material for our sugar industry. And if you remember that every centner of sugar beet equals one pood of sugar, that means one million two hundred packs of lump sugar are as good as in our shops. Or, to make it easier to visualise, one pack of sugar for each soul in a big town like Kharkov or Novosibirsk."

Uncle Sasha was still reading under his breath.

Rogachev M. V., junior sergeant
Romanov F. S., junior sergeant
Salyamov M., private

"...And now, as soon as we have done the field work and cleaned up," Osinkin spoke with enthusiasm, "we can get back to building our new club-house. We won't save money on it, either. If it costs a million, we'll allot a million, and if another half a million is needed, we'll give that too. No question about that! We're all worked well, and we'll enjoy our culture like civilised people—won't we, girls? And our people know how to enjoy themselves. Our group went to the Economic Achievement Exhibition—and look you, they've brought us back another prize."

Every now and again while he was speaking, Osinkin turned his brown eyes quickly towards Zasekin, the way he usually looked back at the platform when he spoke at meetings or conferences.

Sanko A. D., private
Syromyatnikov V. S., private
Tikhomirov P. K., private

Reading and re-reading the names, Uncle Sasha somehow missed the moment when the young Pioneer leader took Osinkin's place. Clutching the ends of her well-ironed tie, which the wind kept trying to whip over her shoulder, she began to speak in a clear, ringing voice about the school's successful research into local war history. Uncle Sasha listened to the spotlessly clean, efficient girl, and suddenly his memory brought back a scene he had witnessed somewhere near Bykhov.

...In winter they had relieved an infantry detachment on a bridgehead across the Dnieper, which, battered and thinned by the heavy fire, had been quietly pulled back across the river—Uncle Sasha was then in command of a company. Looking through his field glasses, he saw in front of their position a dead soldier slung across the German barbed wire, his close-cropped head which had turned blue, hanging helplessly face down. His dried-up arms, bare almost to the elbows stuck out of sleeves of

his greatcoat. He seemed to be stretching out his arms, begging the earth to take him in and shelter him, to protect him from the bullets and shell splinters that kept piercing and mutilating his body. But the wire had a firm grip on him and held him above the ground.

The snow piled up on his body in an ugly, uncanny drift. He was probably one of our sappers or maybe a scout. Uncle Sasha, then Lieutenant Sasha Polosukhin, twice sent people out to move the body. But the Germans were using the corpse as a marker, so two men were lost to no purpose. He never sent another. The soldier hung on the wire till spring and all of them felt conscience-stricken every time they looked in that direction. In April when the corpse thawed out, its backbone gave and broke, and the dead man hung limply folded over the wire.... It was June before they broke through the enemy defences. He, Polosukhin, led the platoon through holes cut in the barbed wire, and he shuddered when he saw that the greatcoat collar was empty and that empty sleeves were flapping in the wind....

Tsukanov A. F., junior sergeant
Tugarinov M. Z., private
Umerenkov K. G., private

Who was the man on the wire? He, too, should have had surname and initials.... Uncle Sasha was thinking that soldiers could meet quite different fates. Even if one fell on the battlefield, one could have been lucky to have been taken away in time and identified, if the company commander in his haste did not mistake him for someone else or left his name out completely.

One would be lucky, too, if the message reached HQ, and then if the HQ was not surrounded, burnt, or bombed out, the clerk's bags and strongboxes with it. If.... There were so many "ifs" before a soldier's name got on a plaque like this on an obelisk over a common grave. Rivers, big and small, bogs and marshes, gulfs, collapsed trenches, houses that fell in, burnt-out tanks and trains, and many other things.... A direct hit, leaving a gaping black and stinking shell hole, where just now a soldier was running with his machine-gun, leaving only clods of falling earth mixed with torn rags that had not even had time to get bloody....

Uzlyakov S. N., private
Vyatkin K. D., private
Zakhoryan A. Sh., sergeant

At that moment, the young Pioneer leader was saying, "No one has been forgotten, nothing has been forgotten! "

She spoke this final sentence in a clear, ringing voice and then tripped lightly down from the obelisk towards the line of children. She was glad she hadn't stumbled once, and her happy face glowed.

Several more people spoke—the director of the local club-house, an elderly but still active woman in an imitation leopard-skin coat whose perfume could be smelled a long way off, then a boy just back from the army in a brand new uniform put on for the occasion with a bright chevron on the sleeve; standing to attention, as he had done in the army not long ago, his arms stiff and straight at his sides, he rapped out phrases about the continuity of army traditions. The next to step into the circle was a stooping history teacher from a neighbouring village leaning on a home-made crutch. He spoke of Alexander Nevsky and his victory over the Swedes on the frozen Chudskoye Lake, then about Kulikovo Field, where Russians first defeated the Tatars, and then he began to recite a poem to suit the occasion, and even got through the first four lines:

He stuck his lance it, doffed his helm, lay down.
The hill was hard and pitted. His chain-mail chafed
His breast, the noonday sun beat on his back....

Then he dried up. The old man stood there nervously rubbing his waxy temple trying to remember the rest. He kept mumbling the last words "beat on his back ... beat on his back...." Then he waved his hand in resignation and smiling in dismay, said, "Sorry, sorry," and stepped back into the crowd.

Another woman came forward, obviously a collective farmer. She wore a woollen shawl, and her face was weather-beaten. A boy of six tried to run after her, but was shooed away. Several hands reached out for him. "You can't, you mustn't go there! What are you doing? " But the little chap dodged them, ran towards the

memorial and stubbornly stood next to the woman, knitting his brows.

"Never mind, let him stay," Zasekin smiled. "He's a hero too, isn't he?"

The woman, who hadn't noticed the boy, hadn't said a word as yet. She had gone white when she got to the monument, and it took a few moments before she cried out in a high, excited voice:

"I tell you what, comrades, two of mine gave their lives. Me, I'm alive, but I'm hurt real bad, I'm crippled for life...."

Suddenly she covered her face with her hands, her fingers stiff and rough from beet and frozen earth.

She stood there, completely still in front of the silent crowd, then finally moved her hands, looked at the crowd with bitterness in her eyes, groping for words to tell them of her long sorrow. But failing to find the words, she suddenly picked up the boy, and holding him up by his arm-pits turned him towards the memorial and cried out, half in tears:

"Look, Vitka, look and remember! This is what war is!"

The little boy, frightened and understanding nothing, kept still and looked at the point of the faceted obelisk.

Ivan Kuzmich Selivanov had undertaken to say a few words on behalf of the veterans.

"What more can I say," he began, his chest heaving under the heavy load of medals. "Well, another monument has been put up to our comrades. That is good, and necessary. Let us all look after it and not allow time to wear away the names. As you can see it's not a very impressive monument, it was made by our local men. No doubt Osinkin could have asked some much better known craftsman, and had it made higher and of real marble, or granite may be. He had enough money, don't we all know that he's our millionaire...."

Osinkin, standing nearby, shifted his bulk impatiently, from one foot to the other, creaking his shoes.

"Do you know why he didn't? Well, this monument is not in a place where many people will go, say, on a tourist route. There won't be any pilgrimages, so why not keep it modest?"

"Well, really, Kuzmich, you can't mean that," Osin-

kin couldn't contain himself any longer. "This is a standard monument. We went to look at the one in Tarasovka. It's exactly the same, only ours is bigger."

"But in the end, it doesn't matter how high the monument is or what it's made of," Selivanov continued. "It is our memory that counts—how we remember the price that was paid to defeat the bitterest of all the enemies that have ever attacked our Russian land." Selivanov stopped for a breath. "My regiment fought its way from Voronezh to Belgrade. There were times when the regiment only had three hundred odd men, including the wounded. And when at the end of the war the CO and I counted up how many people had served in our regiment, we just couldn't believe it. It was twenty-two thousand! You ask me now where they are? This is where they are! " Ivan Kuzmich pointed to the obelisk. "Here! Well, many lingered on a while in one hospital or another. But many were left behind like these buried in the fields. The regiment moved forward to the west, from village to village and town to town leaving a chain of graves behind our path to victory. During all that time these hands of mine wrote death notices by the thousand. They went out to every part of our land, and though we didn't hear them, wherever they arrived thousands of widows and orphans wept.... My regiment did not pass through here, but another regiment, another division did. And their road was the same! "

Someone in the crowd was sobbing. After a short pause to think, Ivan Kuzmich raised his head again:

"And finally, comrades.... I will not call on you to work nobly on the land. You know all that yourselves. I only wish that you, men and women, old soldiers and soldiers' wives, those who took part in the war, who saw it all, that you should all pass on to their children and grandchildren the sacred memory of those who fell, hand it on from one man to another, from one heart to another, before it gets buried in the history books, in some dusty archive. That is all I wanted to say."

Everybody applauded.

Nobody else wanted to speak, although the veterans tried to push each other forward: old man Vassili urged Fyodor Babkin who nudged Tikhon Alyapin who, shyly refusing, tried to persuade Fyodor.

"What kind of a speaker would I make? You're much cleverer than me. Anyway, what could I say? Kuzmich there has said it all."

They were still wrangling among themselves, when Zasekin himself stepped forward.

He walked out into the middle and looked at his watch....

Uncle Sasha had heard at the trade-union committee that some Czech experts were expected at the factory today, some time this evening. The people were all busy sweeping out the canteen and vacuum-cleaners were humming all over the factory hotel. The Czechs had installed powerful new machines there in the summer and now that the new season had begun, they were coming back to check the equipment at full load. Zasekin was supposed to go and meet them, but the meeting had got off to a late start and now it was dragging on, so the chairman of the district executive committee was looking worried.

Of course Uncle Sasha was only guessing about the Czechs. Zasekin might have other urgent business, he had a whole district to look after, and right now the beet harvest was falling behind in several places.

Yet he spoke unhurriedly, in a solid, substantial manner. He described the international situation, talked about the progress made in the district, about what needed doing now, named the best workers and farmers. They listened and they also looked at him with great interest, for many had not been as close to him before.

At this moment, just as he had got into his stride, there was an unexpected interruption. A small tipsy peasant, windswept, his shirt unbuttoned to the navel, was running and someone was chasing him. He stumbled over the bass trumpet lying in the scrub, fell over and began to shout and whimper:

"You stop chasing me. I'm not going home! Stop it. I've got a right, I was in the war too. And I'm soberer than you are anyway!..."

Zasekin stopped, and the man was booed. The band boys took him by the arms and dragged him unceremoniously across the ploughed field towards the lorry. The man kicked the earth with his feet and went on shouting: "What right have *you* got? I was in the war, I was! "

"There, there, stop all that noise! " Pashka shouted merrily, enjoying the chance to stretch his legs and to do something.... "Frig off, will you, or I'll cut your bloody hair off for you, like for fifteen days in jail! Zhora, gimme your scissors! "

"And as to that hagging old bitch.... Trying to boss people around like that. Today is our day. Of course I can have a drink if I want one! "

The woman, her kerchief falling off onto her shoulders, looked very upset as she followed them to the lorry holding one of his shoes which she had picked up in the ploughed field.

Zasekin was silent, then he cleared his throat and waited.

"Is that comedian one of yours? " he asked Osinkin at last.

"Sort of, he's an incomer, somebody's son-in-law."

"Why did you bring him here in that condition? "

"Well, how should we know? He seemed all right on the way here, quite quiet. He must have had it here with someone.... I'll have it out with him when I get home, the rascal! "

"This has turned out pretty badly, Comrade Osinkin," Zasekin reproved.

The boys, all together, hoisted the noisy offender up and dumped him into the back of the lorry like a sack of potatoes, and the woman threw the shoe in after him. The incident had made a stir, the crowd swayed and hummed and the men started smoking. A rowdy song was heard from the lorry.

I'd give all for just one tender look,
Could I be but yours, and yours alo-o-o-ne....

"He's had a few, has Nikitich! " the crowd were mildly disapproving but indulgent. "A good stove-setter, when he's sober though."

The rest of Zasekin's speech was very short, and soon the meeting was declared closed and the band played the National Anthem again. But when the trumpets were silent the crowd still stayed round the obelisk, and men bare-headed.

"That's all, comrades, that's all." Badeiko raised his arms. "Thank you for coming! "

The crowd broke up unwillingly, as if they couldn't take in that it all was over, they turned their heads, looking back as if expecting something more.

Zasekin hurriedly took his leave, reminding as he went: "So the session is for tomorrow, comrades! And be on time please, everybody! " He and his party made for the car. The motor was already running, and they drove away at once. Soon the chairmen, too, went to their cars.

"Vassili Mikhailovich! " called Selivanov from his Volga. "Hop in, I'll give you a lift."

"Well, I don't know...." Grandad Vassili looked confused. "The boys here are planning something.... I think I'll stay on a bit. And you, Kuzmich, won't you join us?"

"Thank you, brothers. These days I can't take a drop, not a single one...." Ivan Kuzmich put his hand on his decorations. "The old engine's not running so well."

"Well, if you can't, you can't...."

Ivan Kuzmich packed his car full of kids who were going his way. His overloaded old car was heeling visibly.

The field was becoming deserted. The Young Pioneers drove off in a bus. Bikes and motorbikes went down the slope, while people going on foot took their time; they didn't have far to go, they came from nearby villages that you could see as clearly from this hillside as on the palm of your hand.

"I'd give ever-r-rything for your tender look," the man in the lorry was still bawling, now popping up over the side, now sinking back onto the bottom. "Only you-oo-oo ... only you-oo-oo...."

Fyodor Babkin came up, took Uncle Sasha's arm:

"A penny for them, old soldier! Come on, sit down with us."

Stepan Kholodov, Tikhon Alyapin, Grandad Vassili and a few others had settled themselves beside the haystack.

"Hey, here's another old eagle! " Grandad Vassili grew animated. "Sit you down, sit you down! Good or not, but we'll hold a good oldfashioned wake."

The old soldiers readily made room for Uncle Sasha on the straw. A vodka glass appeared from nowhere filled to the brim and somebody shoved a tomato into Uncle Sasha's hand.

"Come on, Comrade Lieutenant," Grandpa Vassily said. "They have talked well and long, but those good words haven't been made fast. They'll fly away like so much smoke, those words."

This time the band-leader did not say no, he raised his glass and looked up at the obelisk:

"Well, brothers, forgive us. May you lie easy in the earth."

"May your memory live forever ... live forever," the rest of them joined in hurriedly and in unison, taking off their hats again. "May your memory live forever."

Uncle Sasha knocked back his vodka surrounded by the silent old soldiers whose grey heads were bent in grief.

Suddenly Pashka appeared, wanted to ask something, but, seeing people with bowed heads, stood back hesitating.

"What did you want, Pavel? " Uncle Sasha looked up at him.

"Well ... I wanted to find out.... Will we be playing any more? "

"No."

"Then can we go and stuff too? "

"Well, come on then, sit down," Fyodor moved up and made room.

"No, thanks all the same. We've got our own company." He stood and stared at the men for a minute, then said, offended: "And you wouldn't have one with us, chief."

"Go ahead, Pavel," Uncle Sasha said. "I'll join you presently."

"Oh, never mind, stay here," Pashka said. "I just came to ask if we'd be playing any more, that's all."

Whistling a tune, Pashka went to join the boys who had put out a bottle on the flat of the drum. Zhora was unwrapping bits of food out of rustling paper packets.

With an occasional glance at the women who by now were sitting in the lorries, Fyodor Babkin poured out stealthily, holding the bottle under his coat, and sent the wine-glass round.

"Come on, Stepan, your turn.... Now you, Tikhon...."

The old soldiers drank hurriedly, dipping slices of tomato into a matchbox of pulplike pink salt and, still munching, put their hands into their pockets looking for something to smoke.

There were impatient shouts from the lorries:

"Hi, you, men! What are you lot up to? Let's get going! "

"Just a minute," Fyodor answered. "We're just coming! "

"Won't wait for you, " they called from the lorries.

"Those darn women! " Grandpa Vassili said annoyed as he got to his feet. "They don't even begin to understand. We only get together like this once in a while. We might never see each other again! "

The old soldiers began to get up unwillingly.

"Let 'em go, let 'em," said Uncle Sasha, "I've got a lorry here. Which way do you go, Sorokin? "

"Well, Khmysov here lives in Beryozovka, same as me. Fyodor and Tikhon have to get back to Makhotino, further on than us."

"Don't worry, we'll get everybody home."

Fyodor's face brightened and he ran off to tell them not to wait, and one after another the cars and lorries began to leave.

Back with his friends, Fyodor dug another bottle out from under the hayrick and passed round another drink. They were in no hurry now, so they began to reminisce. Kholodov slapped his knee excitedly:

"Well, brothers, I'll tell you something that happened to us once...."

"Well, tell us then! "

"We were trying to take a hill near Orel. Not a big hill, but there wasn't a bit of cover, not a bush, not a stone, nothing. And down below there—a marsh. We attacked once and were beaten back, and the second time it was no go either. And there was one bloody pillbox up there that kept blazing away.

"We tried the mortar, saw a lot of smoke and dust and thought—we've got 'em! We'd mount another attack, and there he is—rat-tat-tat!... The bugger's still alive! It would have helped if we could have used a gun on 'em, except that we had no guns—only company mortars, that's all, and they weren't much cop—not heavy enough, they just went thump-thump, and left Jerry alive and kicking, and we'd lost too many already. And the battalion commander was cursing, shouting one obscenity after another down the blower at our CO—told him that

the bloody hill had better be taken by such and such a time, or else...."

"You could have taken it at night under cover of dark...."

"At night, mate? What, with our CO sitting there in the trench spitting on his boots absolutely bloody furious? We're all pretty quiet too, getting our breath back after the attack, but what can you do? You can all see the bloody thing, but you can't get at it.

"A young soldier comes and sits down beside me, green as they come. 'Comrade Commander,' he says, 'let me go to that abandoned village. If I find what I need, we'll knock Jerry out of there by midday, I promise you we will.'"

"What was it he was looking for? "

"Don't you butt in. Wouldn't be interesting if I told you now. Anyway, he was allowed to go and presently he comes back dragging something in the sack. 'Had to search half the village,' he says, 'before I found what I wanted.' 'Only trouble is,' he says, 'we have to wait till the sun's light behind Jerry's back.'"

"I've got it," Fyodor laughed. "You used a mirror, am I right? "

"Well, now you've guessed, what's the use of telling...."

"Oh, come on, do go on! "

"Well, we've all set for the next attack and as soon as the sun's behind those Jerries, this fellow gets his trick out of his sack. The glass is as big as a newspaper. 'Well,' says the CO, 'you aim it! ' So he aims it straight into the gun-post. Jerry didn't like it one bit, but what could he do? We rush in, the lot of us, and Jerry starts to shoot. But his aim's gone west, he's shooting all over the place. And the fellow keeps the glass aimed straight at his mug, straight at his ugly mug. Well, there were others beside that machine-gunner, but we dealt with them quick enough! After that we carried that mirror with us everywhere and we looked after it like it was a baby, that secret weapon of ours."

"They did the same thing with searchlights on the Oder."

"When was the Oder, then? We had it near Orel. Maybe our story got to the generals and then on to HQ.

Well, the generals may have all the machines in their hands. But the ideas, they come from the soldiers."

"One time our lot..." an old soldier in wellington boots began....

And they went on and on ... the men talked on, their faces grew red and their eyes lit up, but not with vodka. How can vodka compete when there's a story to tell! And they did have something to tell, of heroic deeds, and of what hurts more than pain itself....

There wasn't a single man beside the obelisk now. A grey cement protuberance, it stood alone and pointed up at the sky among the bare black fields, now ready for the winter.

"How namy of them are there?" Stepan Kholodov asked pensively.

"Forty-nine," answered Uncle Sasha. "Oh, yes ... forty-nine fatherless families somewhere. A whole village."

"Surely they wouldn't all be from the same village?"

"Perhaps not, I only said that to give an idea...."

"Forty-nine is not a lot," Kholodov said and pulled out another cigarette.

"Sometimes they put a hundred or more into the same ditch. Our regiment once lost a whole battalion in three days."

"They say that about four hundred monuments like this will go up around here alone," said Kholodov. "A lecturer came to our place and told us...."

"Could be."

"How many, then, all over Russia?" Grandpa Vassili began counting.

"Well, if you work it out...."

"And all those in Poland, and in many other countries. Threee hundred thousand died outside Berlin."

"They say, twenty million all in all."

"That's frightful," Grandpa Vassili sighed. "All the vodka in the world wouldn't wash that down, whatever you eat with it; not all the vodka in the world."

Grandpa Vassili paused and settling himself more comfortably said in a clear ringing voice, his face brightening:

"And yet, brothers, it is a sacred thing to die fighting the enemy, say what you will. It is the death of deaths.

Take me. Maybe, in three or four years I'll give up the ghost, lying up on the stove, and they'll carry me out of the village and bury me. That's all. Because I'll die of old age. But if I'd died out there like a soldier, look what kind of death it would have been. They might even have built a monument for me."

They smoked for a long time, and they could hear the musicians arguing as they sat round their drum.

"No, Zhora, the team from the mill hasn't got an earthly. Which one of them can play? Haven't got any forwards, have they, just a bunch of layabouts, that's what they've got."

"Just you wait. They'll make it, you'll see."

"They will, will they! Even the district coop boys can beat that lot of softies."

Stepan Kholodov tucked the empty sleeve of his padded jacket back into his belt.

"Four hundred, are there.... Well, if you put up monuments in all the places they ought to go, in every place where there's been a battle, there wouldn't be anywhere left to plough."

Grandpa Vassili squinted at the distant slopes as if trying to see where all those unbuilt obelisks should stand.

"They ought to have put them up earlier," Fyodor said, "right after the war. The young ones have grown up, and they should've seen what it all cost before the grass begins to grow over it. It's easily done. Once plough it up and everything is gone, smooth and even, as if it had never been."

"I'd put it like this," Grandpa Vassili wiped his moustache with the back of his hand. "You can lose a pawn at chess and put it back to start another game. But a soldier, he only has one life. You can't put him back on the board. So if he has to lay down his life, that life is beyond all value."

The boys round the drum were laughing.

"Just hark at him, that's some whopper he's telling you."

"So?" Pashka was fuming. "Take that Zyuzya for one, he's worth a dozen of theirs."

"Your Zyuzya is a shit!"

"Zyuzya a shit? Don't give me that. You should have seen the way he kicked that penalty. Did you see

it? As far as from this haystack to the monument! Thirty metres! Straight between the posts! "

The men paused, listening to the musicians' arguing.

Presently the sun's last rays shone through the clouds, low down near the horizon, casting a purple light over the far-off hills which crowded one behind the other to be lost in the distance. The sunrays picked out a church among the hills that had been invisible before. The shivering, lively light moved fast, closer and closer. A row of poplars blazed up on the nearby slope, the ploughed soil warmed up to a brassy red and the oblongs of newly sown wheat turned bright yellow-green.

The old soldiers, leaning against the warm rick, were unwillingly admiring that unexpected resurrection of the sun, the long bright sunrays hurrying across the earth.

Suddenly the razor-sharp edges of the obelisk blazed up like lightning against a dark, overcast sky. At this hour of evening, it looked utterly detached, aloof from the daily routine, and it seemed to Uncle Sasha that the fluffy splendour of wreaths at its foot, the gaudy paper flowers, the green fir branches and black and red bands looked somehow futile and incongruous. An old musician who had been to many funerals, he hated wreaths. Soon they would turn yellow, the needles would fall and the rains would wash out the inscriptions. And there is nothing quite so sad as the withered litter on a gravestone.

After its last brief glory, the sun vanished into a gloomy shroud, and the sunset spread in a purple strip along the length of the horizon. Soon the hills were finally wrapped in the sad blue of evening.

"It's time we went home," Grandpa Vassili said, looking at the sky. "If only it doesn't rain. My damn leg has been aching for two days now."

The rest of them, each coming back to the present, started to get up and pick up their things; Uncle Sasha went to tell the driver, asleep in his cab, to take the old soldiers home.

Then the lorry drove off, puffing and pitching over the bumps, taking Grandpa Vassili and the rest.

It grew quieter in the twilight; the clouds drew closer together and hung overhead like impenetrable armour. It began to drizzle, just a fine spray first, then it started to

rain in earnest. The musicians left their instruments lying in the field and took shelter under the eaves of the scruffy haystack.

Uncle Sasha kept going to the edge of the field to look towards the dirt-road for the lorry. They had been expecting for two hours now, but it was as dark as it can only be in an autumn field in the rain.

"Any sign of it yet, chief?" the musicians asked impatiently.

Uncle Sasha was silent.

"Probably holed up somewhere drinking moonshine," Pashka decided.

The boys were puffing gloomily at their cigarettes. Mice could be heard squeaking and moving noisily in the stuffy heart of the rick. Somebody remembered that the Soviet team were playing against the Spaniards and that they obviously would not make it in time, the game was on the air at seven, and it was gone six now.

"That's a tenner gone," said Sokhin the trumpet player who had grown side whiskers down to his chin. "Or more."

"Tenner? Where?" Ivan Beeflat showed interest. "Playing a funeral?"

"Funeral, my eye!" Sokhin pulled a disgusted face. "I haven't raised the wind at funerals for a long time. You pick up your three rubles playing funerals. They asked me to play a wedding."

"Weddings are great," Ivan agreed. "I've played weddings. Only thing is they want you to play such a lot."

Ivan Beeflat was pulling out straw and pushing it around to make himself getting comfortable like a dog. It smelled musty from being stoved so long. Presently he quietened down and soon they heard him snore.

"Doing his scales," jeered Romka.

The rain grew noticeably heavier, it was drumming on their raincoats, and the boys, their feet tucked under, were pressing closer and closer into the haystack. Only Ivan Beeflat snored away undisturbed, not noticing the wet. A flock of rooks appeared out of god knows where; they nearly hid the sky, then flew away in an oblong hubbub to the east, towards their sleeping places, dissolving into the grey veil of rain. As the rooks flew away, the darkness thickened, veiled the rick and made time

slow down. Pashka took off his short Italian raincoat and tried to cover himself with it, but didn't manage to stay under it; the wet and the irritation welling up in him made him get to his feet, and he looked as angry as a polecat at bay.

"Why the frigging hell was the lorry sent off?" he spat, and followed it with his eyes, with a furious tossing of his tousled red head, "While we're stuck here kicking our heels."

"The chief has been a bit too smart," Sokhin said, looking angrily at Uncle Sasha who was pacing up and down beside the haystack.

The others kept guarded silence.

"We only played twice anyway. Hardly worth coming all that way! " Pashka was getting more and more irritated. "Couldn't they have got some other band? Every collective farm's got its bunch of windbags these days." He pulled his coat on with a jerk, butted his head into the straw, and shouted, "I think the chief asked to be invited! "

"Why can't you stop grumbling! " Uncle Sasha interrupted him. Restraining himself, he walked uncertainly towards the instruments which glittered dimly in the stubble. He nearly fell over the drum in the dark. It had been put down away from the other instruments. Lying on the pigskin among the empty bottles were scraps of wet newspaper, eggshells and the remains of some anchovies. The chief was nearly beside himself with fury. Damn it, couldn't they at least get rid of their rubbish? Feeling that he is losing control he suddenly shouted:

"Pick up your instruments! "

Baffled, the boys stayed where they were.

"Get up, everybody! " Uncle Sasha said in a muffled voice and he felt his jaws tightening.

First the musicians stayed put, then stirred unwillingly in the straw.

"What's up then, chief?" inquired Sokhin in a carefree drawl. Getting no answer, he shrugged his shoulders. "What's eating him? "

Shivering in the rain, and shaking bits of straw off their trousers and jackets, the bedraggled musicians dragged themselves along to sort out their instruments.

There was a welter of irritated voices:

"Whose alto trumpet is this? "

"Careful, you ass, you'll step on my French horn! "

"Shut up! "

"Ivan, have you picked up your tin horn? "

Without waiting for them, Uncle Sasha was the first to step out on the rough ploughed field which was completely wet by now. The boys, sloshed and struggled along behind him through the sticky mud. When they reached the cart-track, the band-leader stopped and waited for the others. Then he ordered them, "Fall in. In threes."

The reluctant boys protested.

"What for? We're not recruits, are we? What is all this, anyway? "

"Stop talking! "

They all knew how a band falls in. Cornets in the front rank, then the tenors, altoes, basses.... But they couldn't see why they should march in line, especially in the pouring rain.

"No need to show off, chief," Sokhin tried to stop him. "What's come over you? "

"Fall in! " Uncle Sasha's voice sounded strangely foreign and peremptory.

"Oh well! " Sokhin drew back and, perplexed and smiling, shoved in between Kurochkin and Belibin.

"Is the drum here? " called Uncle Sasha, looking over the musicians who were gloomily shifting from one foot to the other.

"Here," Seva answered from the back.

"Beeflat bass? "

"Well, yes, I'm here..." Ivan Beeflat responded unwillingly.

"Quick march! " Uncle Sasha turned sharply and moved forward. "No falling behind! "

They were walking in estranged silence, and the only sound was the squelching of their shoes on the sticky cart-track and trumpets clanging against one another. Once in a while one of them would strike a match and shielding it from the wind, light his cigarette without stopping. Only Pashka went on muttering discontentedly, cursing the lorry driver, the weather, the mud and his luck.

"Where are we making for anyway? " asked Sokhin sarcastically.

"Don't you know?" Pashka puffed in disgust. "From one end of nowhere to the other."

"Not quite that bad. We're making for the road," Zhora suggested.

"Not that bad indeed! Ten kilometres—and then?"

"After that we hitch-hike."

"I don't give a damn!" snorted Pashka. "We walk till we see a village."

"And how about getting to work tomorrow?" Kurochkin asked in dismay. "Me, I start very early."

"That's the chief's problem—it's not our fault."

The downhill slope was so steep that their feet seemed to be stepping into a void. The hills rose higher and higher on either side leaving less and less of the dim grey sky overhead. The slope went on endlessly, down and down. The road was barely visible and the boys, their feet slithering and sliding, felt as if they were descending straight into a hell invisible in the darkness and the rain.

Further down, they suddenly felt a wave of cold musty air and a whiff of stagnant water and rotting reeds hit their nostrils. Then slush squelched underfoot.

"That's torn it. I've scooped up a gallon of water in my bloody shoes. Paid thirty rubles for them only last week, and they're completely done for."

"You ought to tread on the stones."

"What stones? What stones when there's nothing but bog all round."

Brittle willow stems loomed up on both sides of the road and beneath them it became as dark as in a cave. The rain was making muffled noises somewhere way overhead, losing its way in a thicket of branches, so that only the odd heavy drop hit their backs. Dropping out of line, the boys sloshed on veering away from each other, looking for solid lumps to step on. Slippery brushwood began to crunch underfoot: the drivers must have left it there to fill in boggy holes in the road. The springy twigs caught at their trousers, lashing out painfully, and at every step mud squelched out from under them. Ivan Beeflat fell into a ditch, and then rustled around in the bushes for a long time looking for his cap. Back on solid ground, he started telling everybody that they were going the wrong way, that it wasn't the right road they

needed, and that anyway they should have stayed put in the first place.

"We'll fetch up at some dead end for sure," he mumbled, his awkward lanky figure moving jerkily from one branch to another. "There was not any bog when we came, was there?"

"That's true!" Pashka gloated. "Where have you landed us, chief? Catch me coming with you next time. Some guide—a bloody do-it-yourselfer if you ask me."

Uncle Sasha stopped and waited for Pashka.

"You know what, Pavel," he said, catching the boy by the sleeve. "You take the drum from Seva."

"Why me?"

"Because all you've got to carry is your cymbals."

"Why don't you let your darling Kurochkin carry it? It's all he's any good for anyway."

"No, you'll carry it," Uncle Sasha was implacable.

"Pavel do this and Pavel do that," Pashka mimicked. "You've been picking on me all day."

"Well if you won't, I'll carry it myself."

Pashka stayed silent and tried to pull his sleeve away from Uncle Sasha who had a firm grip on it. Then suddenly he yelled:

"Sevka, you louse, give us the banging machine then."

"It's all right, Uncle Sasha," said Seva, "I can manage."

"Give it to him, let him carry it," Uncle Sasha said severely and, letting go of Pashka, went ahead.

Pashka jerked the drum away from Seva who had just caught up, pushed the cymbals at him, muttered an angry obscenity, and kicked him. "All right, lunkhead!" he said.

The boys filed past Pashka without a word. Pashka sat down on the drum and puffed greedily at his cigarette. When all of them had passed, he shambled along behind to avoid their company.

Holding the rickety handrails they groped their way across a tiny bridge which they might or might not have noticed on their way here.

There were no willows beside them now and the path seemed to be inclining upwards. The sky had opened out and seemed a little brighter. Everybody expected to find a village. But the path, which had become more muddy, stretched out ahead of them dishearteningly straight.

Only the telegraph poles still loomed up against a rainy grey sky. They could hear nothing but the rain lashing their backs and their instruments. The boys sloshed on behind Uncle Sasha like ruffled sparrows, no longer bothering to avoid the holes and puddles. Brushed to a lustrous sheen this morning, the twelve pairs of shoes were now listless and out of step, as they slurped, squelched and slithered through the thick creamy muck. Listening to their disorderly sloshing feet, the band-leader sensed the resentment of these youngsters who had seen nothing in their lives and now saw themselves as martyrs, victims of unjust, despotic orders. Things had indeed gone wrong, and Uncle Sasha had an unpleasant sensation of guilt towards the boys, though they really should see why he had given up the lorry to the old soldiers, they really should.

...In '43, he had been leading some three hundred callow youths like these, young boys from a reserve regiment. It had rained that time, too, and the roads had become impassable. They only walked at night because of the planes. By dawn they would have made thirty or forty kilometres. Their high heavy imitation leather boots and their greatcoats were so swollen with water that they never really dried out during their short daytime stops. Their rations were meagre and they had little sleep. The boys weakened noticeably; they grew thin and their faces darkened. By the end of the week they were falling asleep on their feet. You could see them walking, with heads drooping, holding on to a comrade like blind men. A few minutes of oblivion, then again treading along heavily, churning the interminable mud on the road behind the front. They did not walk those last thirty miles, they literally struggled through them. He remembered how they finally saw those buildings, their point of destination, looming ahead of them in the early mist. Everyone had only one thought: When we get there, I'll sleep, just sleep no matter where or how.

Suddenly a mounted messenger came up. The regimental commander himself was going to inspect the new reinforcements.

The order was passed down the line: "Attention! Form up in fours! Spruce up your uniforms." Standing in an open jeep at the crossroads was an old mous-

tachioed lieutenant-colonel. He rose and raised his hand to his bandaged head to salute the company, who were just about on their last legs.

"I congratulate you on joining the ranks of the Regular Army," the colonel shouted hoarsely. "I confer upon you all the title of Guardsmen." Then an orchestra behind him struck the bright festive march: *The Morning Sun Kisses the Kremlin Walls.* It was a cheerless cloudy morning, and the rain splashed into muddy puddles. Downcast and mud-spattered, the soldiers straightened their ranks as best they could, lifted their weary heads, and the front ranks made some attempt at a ceremonial march. The music was so bright and cheerful, it seemed to call for something beautiful and elated.

Moscow, powerful, bustling city, Moscow the invincible, sang the trumpets in a bright and cheerful way. The company fell in with renewed vigour and echoed the tune with heavy tread. "Marching well, Comrade Guardsmen," the colonel called out. "Well done, lads! "

There was no rest that day. The company were issued their rifles and sent off on forced march of another thirty kilometres, and that evening Uncle Sasha led them in their first counter-attack. They stopped the enemy but for many it was their last battle....

"Cheer up! " Uncle Sasha called to the boys, listening to their slow footsteps on the road.

On a hillock beside the first cottage, the band-leader stopped. Bright electric light pierced through the rain and there, in an island of light, they saw a dark plank fence. An overflowing water barrel gurgled in the front garden. One by one, they walked up to the cottage in silence. Ivan Beeflat unslung his horn and turned it upside down to empty out a stream of water. In the yard a dog sensed strangers, rattled his chain and jumped around in a frenzy. His hoarse, furious barking was answered by steps slapping down the corridor. Then a wooden bar clattered, and a girl in a long flapping housedress appeared in the lighted doorway.

"Who is it? " she drew back at the sight of the trumpets, glittering in the night.

"The Bremen musicians," said Romka putting on the affected bass—as he always did when he was flirting with a girl.

"Who? ... I don't know... Mum, Mum," the girl ran off leaving the door open. "Mum, there's people outside...."

There was a high-baked leatherette sofa in the open corridor and a large rubber tree plant and some zink buckets on a wooden bench. A grey cat curled up on a patch-work mat on the clean, painted floor on the threshold, got up, stretched his front paws and yawned, sharpened his claws on the mat and stared at the strangers crowding round the porch. A plump round-faced woman with a warm shawl around her shoulders came out to meet them. Uncle Sasha explained who they were and from where.

"Oh, you poor things, in the pouring rain! " she exclaimed, all sympathy. "Come on in out of the wet! Come in, no sense getting even wetter, come in, do."

The bandsmen were putting down their instruments in the light patch outside the window, but their hostess protested:

"Bring your music with you. Not that anyone would take them.... But you never know, a lorry might run over them by accident and crush them, or something might happen.... Don't leave them there."

They wiped their shoes on the grass beside the door and shook out their raincoats. Then the boys got up onto the porch, filling the entrance with a smell of clothes and rain. The cat prudently slipped off to the kitchen. Not knowing whether they should stay where they were or go on in, the boys crowded awkwardly and looked around.

"Come on in," the woman invited, "the lorry will have to come past here and it can't just slip by on a road like this. We're bound to hear it."

Leaving their coats and shoes piled up in the entrance, the boys filed shyly through the kitchen into the living room.

Four girls stood beside the tile stove with their hands behind their backs and looked guardedly at their unexpected guests.

"Hullo, again," said Romka slyly, and going up to the girl who had opened the door, held out his hand and introduced himself: "I'm Roma."

The girl blushed, looked at Roma's hand confused, then, making up her mind at last shook it and said:

"Vera."

"Pleased to meet you! " said Romka satisfied, and offered his hand to the next girl.

"Roma."

"Serafima," the other girl, who was wearing a black track-suit answered readily.

"Roma."

"Nadya."

"Roma."

"Nonna."

"Delighted to meet you. Those are my guards," Romka pointed to the bandsmen standing around them. "Same as in that song 'Don't the guards get up too early',* you know."

The girls laughed.

The first awkwardness gone, Romka, shoving more brushwood into the fire, asked:

"Are you all sisters then? "

"Yes, Siamese twins," said Serafima.

"I see."

"Sisters-in-beet," Nadya explained.

"In what? Sorry, I didn't get it."

"No? We've come here to help with the beet harvest."

"Oh, you're students. Was it you that threw beet at us? "

"When? " asked the girls surprised.

"Where? " asked Romka.

"Where? What do you mean? " the girls looked at each other.

"Where? " said Romka again. "So it's you who're asking me! "

The girls saw the trick and burst out laughing.

Uncle Sasha stayed in the kitchen with their hostess who had just brought in a bucket of coal from the yard.

She clanged the scoop, tossing on the coal which hissed damply in the fire, and complained bitterly of the rain. They could really do without it, what with so much sugar beet still in the fields. Rain didn't bother her, she said, she worked under cover in a shed, but the other

* A song from the Soviet cartoon film *"The Musicians of Bremen"*, based on a fairy-tale by the brothers Grimm.

women would suffer for the beet was pretty messy to handle in the mud. These girls from town who were lodging with her now—they had been sent here to bring in the harvest. The one in the house-dress was her daughter Vera, the others were strangers here. They had just come in from the fields, and only just had time to wash and change. And then tomorrow they would have to start again at the crack of dawn. Vera went with them, too. It was her last year at school, the hardest, most important year but she'd been sent to pull sugar beet, all the same.

She spoke with the open cordiality common among country women.

"I decided to warm the house up with coal to get the girls' clothes dry, they came back so wet and mucky. Maybe I should have let the old Russian stove to pamper them with some real heat, but I was afraid it might smoke, it hasn't been used for so long. Very few people use the old stoves now, it's easier to make do with a little stove. Time was when we all baked our own bread and cooked up cattle mash. Now all that's in the past. I even thought of pulling it down to make more room in the house, but then I took pity on it, I'm sort of used to it. I used to sit on top of it when I was a little girl, see what an old this stove is."

"The house seems quite new," Uncle Sasha remarked, looking at the even ceiling and the fresh-looking beam.

"The house was built after the war, but the stove is from the old house. When the Germans burned down the village, only the ovens were left standing. The bricks of ours are all pock-marked by shells and bullets, and there were a lot of holes in it. We filled it all in with clay, but if you chipped it off, you'd see that there's not a bit of it untouched. Our stove's a hero, it deserves a medal." The hostess smiled. "It wouldn't be right to pull it down now."

An old woman in patched felt boots came in out of a tiny side room and leant against the doorpost. Her greeting was quiet and unconcerned.

"I was just telling about our stove, mama," the woman raised her voice a bit. "About all the bullet-holes in it."

"A-ah." Holding the small of her back and leaning against the table, the old woman slowly lowered herself

onto a stool. "That was a long time ago," she said looking at the newcomer with greater interest.

"It all began with the stove. Our whole life today that is. When Jerry was gone," the old woman said with good-natured cheerfulness, "we crept out of the cellar into God's world and it just wasn't there any more. Nothing left of our yard, not a single blessed thing, just the black stove. I looked at the chimney—it looked so long without the roof, tall and horrible. I took a look around and I couldn't find the village. Only the road. And there it was, the field, right next to me! "

"Tell him about the cabbage soup, do tell him, Pelageya."

The woman laughed.

"We had some cabbage soup cooking in the oven. Before the fire started, that is. We got the lid off and it was just a lot of black soot."

The old woman smiled wanly:

"It was cooked all right—really well done! "

"Yes.... So what to do, where to start? How to live? Well we began with our bread-giver, put wattle round it and patched it up with clay. And put a roof of tall weeds on top. It wasn't quite a barn, a shed, sort of. That's what we began with."

Her daughter Vera, looking rather red in the face, ran out into the kitchen asking: "Mama, can I give the boys some apples? "

"Of course," said Pelageya. "We didn't buy them, we grew them," she explained. "Go to the cellar, dear, and fetch some."

The girl went out and came back with a sieveful of large well-stored Antonovka apples.

A whiff of cigarette smoke wafted in from the room, and Uncle Sasha heard Romka, who seemed to have made himself thoroughly at home, talking away, and the girls giggling now and then.

"Won't you have something to eat, too? " the hostess turned to Uncle Sasha. "You must have been playing out in that field all day." And, without waiting for an answer, she began to fuss around the shelf. She took down some bread, and a jug of milk and poured some out into a mug, wiped the bottom and offered it to her guest.

"Here, have some, come on, do."

The old woman began to nod. After a short pause, she asked: "I didn't hear in which field you were playing?"

"Over there behind the village," Uncle Sasha pointed. "Across the bridge."

"Oh, I see."

"Up behind the ravine, mama," Pelageya explained.

"I see ... so, behind the ravine..." the old woman echoed. "The fighting was very heavy there. They fought there for weeks and weeks. Jerry beats ours, then ours beat Jerry, Jerry kept shooting away, but ours wouldn't give in. When metal comes up against stone. The field was all dug up, the wlole of it. All the grenades and other death machines they left there. My heart turned cold with fright every time the boys ran out to play. How many of them got killed or maimed! That field was wild. For two springs they didn't plough it and only starving dogs went near it."

Uncle Sasha drew his mug towards him, and the two women suddenly fell silent while he ate; they grew sad, looked sorrowfully and with a quiet attention at the aging, tired man sitting at their table eating bread and sipping at his milk.

"Oh, yes," the old woman sighed at some thought she didn't share, and smoothed the table cloth. Eating his bread, he felt them looking and thought that probably no man had sat at this table for a long time, that they must have longed to see one there.

Vera ran out into the porch with the empty sieve, and there were cheerful noises in the room, and an intermittent munching of apples.

"What shall we pay for our treat?" they heard Romka's voice.

"What are you talking about! We don't want anything," Vera answered. "Why don't you play for us?"

"We'd be delighted."

The old woman inclined her head and listened for a while, as deaf people do, to the conversation in the room, then she said: "Our Alexei, too, he used to play the accordion. They would gather like this and make a lot of noise."

"And Kolya, didn't he play?" said Pelageya.

"And Kolya, and Kolya, too," the old woman nodded eagerly. "Kolya was a merry one too. They both loved fun."

"Sons?" Uncle Sasha asked.

"My sons, my dearest sons," she began to nod again. "Her brothers, Pelageya's. Fetch the pictures, Pelageya, let him look at them."

Pelageya went to an unlit side room, and fetched a small frame with several photographs: it was painted the same colour as the flower pots on the window-sill, and the washstand in the corner. Polishing the glass on her apron as she came in, she said apologetically:

"Used to hang in the big room till Vera nagged us to take it down. She says they no longer have everyone in one frame these days, it's out of fashion. She says they should be kept in albums now. So I took it down and hung it in mama's dark room."

Pelageya put the frame on the table leaning it against the wall. The old woman screwed up her eyes, and the muscles in her face grew tense as she reached over for the photos.

"I can't see which is which now. Isn't this Alexei? Here, Pelageya, you can see better, you tell us."

"This one is Kolya with his friends. They took it at the tractor station."

"I see, I see.... And I can't make out who this is here."

"That's Kolya, too." And she explained to Uncle Sasha, "We've got three pictures of Kolya. This is him, too. With Vassili, another boy from our village. They went into the same unit. There's only one picture of Alexei. Did you really forget that, mama? It used to be on this side of the frame!"

"Well, maybe someone moved it to the other corner some time," the old woman defended herself. "But, yes, I do remember ... Alexei ... my boy."

With her shaky fingers, she touched the glass over the tiny passport photo with a blank corner for the stamp. Uncle Sasha could hardly make out the blurred features either on the faded photograph badly developed by a photographer at the front. Only the eyes, and the service cap set at an angle on a close-cropped head were still clear. It looked as though the features would fade from this scrap of paper any minute under a yellow patina of oblivion. And Uncle Sasha thought that the old mother,

withered and half blind, no longer looked at the photograph. For her, it was nothing but faded emptiness. Even in her memory, the boy's features had to be resurrected after all these years with more and more difficulty and less and less likeness. Only the mother's heart remains faithful.

"I do remember Alexei," said the old woman in a dispassionate voice, as if she had withdrawn into herself. "I do, he was my firstborn. He was teething while I was still nursing him at the breast. Sometimes he used to bite so hard...." The old woman stroked her cotton print blouse, till her shaking hand stopped at a button.

"This is Styopa and me," Pelageya said quickly, even cheerfully, casting an alarmed look at her mother. "Soon after we married. That was after the war." Pelageya's eyes, quiet and sad, came to rest on a snapshot in which she, a happy, watchful girl with her hair parted in the middle, stood with her head hardly reaching the shoulder of a severe-looking, middle-aged man. "My Stepan Petrovich and me...."

She paused, giving Uncle Sasha time to look at her in her youth and at her Stepan.

"These are all cousins and aunts. All on our side of the family. Only father is missing. He never did get time to have his picture taken before the war, and then we kept asking him to send one from the front, but we never got one. Everybody's here, but him."

Pelageya took the frame back to the side room, and when she came back, she summed up: "We lost four from our house. And you couldn't count how many from the village."

"Who's the fourth? " asked Uncle Sasha.

"The fourth was my Styopa. We got married after the war. He fought right through into Germany, and death caught up with him late, at home—his wounds reopened. He endured no end of suffering. Then he went into hospital and never came back."

Pelageya's face crumpled, and she went quickly to the stove, to put on the rest of the coal, and stood there for quite a while, poking the fire and levelling it off.

"My Styopa lies there well looked after," she said, still looking at the stove. "We have put a fence around his grave, and we change the photograph when it fades. I

had ten enlargements made so they would last as long as I'm alive. I go there myself sometimes and cry a bit like women do. And all my other kin, where are they? Two years ago I went to look for father's grave. They wrote that he was somewhere near Velikiye Luki, so I went there. They even told me at the army office where to look, in which district. Near the Loknya station. I found the monuments there all right. But would one know which was his? Eternal memory it says, but who to? And maybe he isn't under any of them. The local people say that even now they find human bones in mires and moors.... So I came back no better off.... Nikolai, he served in the Naval Air Force."

Pelageya lowered her voice. "No use even looking for him. And Alexei? We never even got a death notice.... I used to wait and hope. But now, after all these years.... Only mama still hopes."

The old woman was jealously straining to hear, then she raised her eyes to the ceiling and said in a doleful half-whisper:

"Oh, God. Just think of our men lying unburied."

"Come, come, mama!" Pelageya said, fearful. "Is that possible? Unburied? What ideas you do get!"

Uncle Sasha smoked in silence looking at the black window-panes and at slanting tracer bullet raindrops that lit up as they hit the glass. And in his mind's eye he saw that unknown soldier stack on the barbed wire, his blue hands stretching longingly towards the earth. And remembered how he had finally fallen out of that great-coat bone by bone.

And the old woman sat silent, her elbows resting firmly on her knees, staring at the crimson embers, the way she must have sat all those long years patiently waiting for a miracle to happen.

In the next room, the girls were again asking Romka to play.

"Why don't you play us something? Do you grudge your breath?"

"Shake? *Bossa Nova*?" said Romka casually.

"Can you?" the girlish voices brightened.

"You bet."

"Oh do play a shake, do!"

"Well, lads, shall we blow a shake?"

"Let's give 'em a shake."

"Oh, please do! " the girls clapped their hands.

Romka appeared in the kitchen doorway. Leaning on the doorpost as if he owned the place, he said excitedly:

"Chief, the girls want us to play them a shake. What say you? "

For a moment Uncle Sasha didn't take in what Romka was saying.

Then he moved away from the window, looked at Romka with unseeing eyes and turned away again.

Romka kept a puzzled silence, then asked more quietly:

"Uncle Sasha? Hey, Uncle Sasha, shall we play? "

At that moment the old woman spoke up; she had heard Romka's question and, touching Uncle Sasha's hand, begged him:

"Play, dear, play. It always used to be gay and cheerful in our house. Alexei loved music. He even took his accordion to the front with him. I told him not to. 'Lyosha, son, why load yourself up like that, it's heavy, isn't it? Will you have time to play it out there? ' And he just laughed. 'Oh, it'll come in handy, mama,' he said. Well, I suppose he would have found time for it, even out there, he was that kind of lad.... And Kolya, too, loved.... Play, dear, play."

Uncle Sasha looked at the old woman intently, and heard her words. Deep in thought he turned, looked into Romka's questioning eyes and said quietly:

"Indeed, let us play, Roma," and rising added, "Get your instruments, then."

In the room the boys, who had grown quiet, all shouted at once, and chairs rattled as they hurried to the porch for their trumpets. Uncle Sasha was handed his black case and followed Pelageya into the sitting room. The old woman also hobbled in and sat down by the window. The girls were hurriedly moving the table and chairs to the wall to clear a space for dancing.

"Well, Sima, are you going to dance in your training suit? "

"Why not? It's only a shake! Look, Vera is in her dressing gown."

"I won't dance," Vera faltered. "I don't know this kind of dance."

"Oh, come on. There's nothing to it. Come on, come on, I'll have to put on my shoes, too."

The girls disappeared behind the curtain.

"How about you, where's your instrument?" Uncle Sasha looked at Sokhin who stood a little way off munching an apple.

"I thought I'd take a turn at dancing. You can manage with one alto, can't you?"

"I want you here with your instrument. Go and fetch it."

Sokhin shrugged his shoulders crossly and went out.

The boys, each with his instrument at the ready, stood round the band-leader and watched him as he untied the string and slowly uncovered his beautiful shiny cornet. He did it solemnly, as never before, concentrating on it, as if he were blind. The girls were all dressed up and talking in whispers, as they took their places beside Pelageya who looked sadly at their hair and dresses.

Uncle Sasha tapped the cornet with his fingernail.

The trumpets froze, held at the ready.

Looking down at his fingers, already on the valves, he paused and then announced, enunciating each word with care:

"Chopin.... Sonata number two."

The boys looked at their leader, startled, and their eyes, their very silence seemed to ask: A sonata? Why a sonata of all things? Somebody whispered: "What's got into him?" The girls, too, exchanged surprised glances. Only Pelageya, who didn't understand any of it, went on smiling and waiting for the music with pleasure.

Uncle Sasha tapped his cornet again:

"We'll play the third movement. You know it."

"Yes, of course we do...." Romka gave a cold nod for all the band.

"Attention."

Once again he looked the band over.

"Two, three and...."

Still bewildered, still feeling it was a mistake, the musicians, with a sort of doomed inevitability struck up a B minor chord, low and slow like the rumble of an underground explosion.

Pelageya, for whom "sonata" and "Chopin" simply meant music and therefore merriment, started at the first

sounds as if she had been hit. With a dismayed smile she looked over at the old woman who, however, only lowered her eyelids and crossed her withered rheumatic arms more comfortably.

Uncle Sasha nodded approvingly at the beginning and motioned the repeat. The boys all together took breath and struck the higher note, repeating the low sighs with confidence and enthusiasm now. He could see Ivan Beef-lat, at the back, puffing out his cheeks, his troubled gaze fixed on some distant spot.

Near him, the small, round-faced Seva was beating his sticks, drumming the heavy, slow steps of the funeral march and Pashka, his hair still tousled and wet after the rain, seconded him with his cymbals which splashed among the bass and baritone horns with a disturbing clangour.

Sounds of pain and suffering groaned and beat heavily in the small room, breaking on the walls and window-panes, trembling with fear.

Soon the three shiny cornets went up and filled the room with heart-breaking sobbing.

The dressed-up girls, their eyes lowered, were looking down at their shoes, Pelageya's shoulders sagged, and only the old woman, her big brown hands lying in her lap, sat up, very straight and motionless.

Her grey face ravaged with wrinkles was placid and one might think that she had fallen asleep to the music and did not even hear the weeping trumpets in her widowed home. But she heard everything, and, forgetting everyone around her and herself, was quietly and gratefully absorbing the grief and sorrow of the lacerated soul of the to her unknown Chopin with a mother's broken heart.

And Uncle Sasha was remembering that it was about this very sonata, this great sonata, that some other great man had said that this grief is not only for one fallen hero.

The pain is such as if all soldiers had died, to the last man, leaving behind them only women, children, and priests bowing their heads mournfully before the numberless victims....

At that moment Vera, the granddaughter, suddenly buried her face in her hands and ran behind the curtain.

The girls rose one by one to join her, walking on tiptoe. And, like the last drops of rain that fall down in the sight of a clean-washed sun, with no storm-clouds and no peals of thunder, Uncle Sasha led the tune on his cornet with only tenor horns accompanying him quietly. The bass horns and drums were silent.

It was a high-pitched silver solo melody, a gentle soothing sound, palpitating and lucid after all the tears are shed.

The boys who did not have to play the basses and baritones,—listened to this unusual, clear, high-voiced singing from Uncle Sasha's cornet in mute fascination as the sound grew lighter and lighter, more and more appeased. The sorrow seemed to melt and vanish into the air, finally ending in a gentle sigh and silence. Uncle Sasha took the mouthpiece from his lips. Pale, sweating, he quickly, absent-mindedly put his hand into his pocket for a handkerchief. For some reason he did not want to play the repeat, the bass passage with which Chopin ends his march. Perhaps he did not want to put out the light of that soothing, purifying melody with a heavy epitaph.

There was still silence in the room when he had wiped his face and began slowly, tiredly to put his trumpet back into its case. Only Vera's occasional sobs were heard from behind the curtain.

At last the old woman got up and pushing aside Pelageya, who hurried over to support her she hobbled off by herself.

"That's good," she said. "You played well.... Now we've seen our boys to rest. Thank you."

And, stopping in the middle of the room, she made a sign of the cross to the corner.

The musicians lit their cigarettes in silence.

They walked towards the road in the pitchdark, the cold invisible rain was pouring down just as before, and the drops clanged against the trumpets, their wet shoes squelching and sticking in the mud.

They passed deep swelling puddles, empty ploughed fields, sleeping villages that smelled of fallen leaves and the thin smoke from dying embers. There was not a single light anywhere, and only village dogs, light sleepers, disturbed by squelching footsteps on the road, gave muffled barks from their courtyards.

They walked on in silence, barely exchanging a word, and the band-leader heard their heavy breathing as they walked in formation close behind him.

Like that time in forty-three....

And Uncle Sasha, holding his hand to his aching heart (again that dull pain; these last years it had given him no peace), encouraged the band in a loud voice: "Never mind, lads. We'll soon be there."

MIKHAIL ALEXEYEV

(b. 1918)

He was born in the village of Monastyrskoye, Saratov region. From 1938 to 1955 he served in the army. During the Great Patriotic War he fought his way from Stalingrad to Vienna. He began writing professionally after the war. In 1957 he graduated from the Higher Literary Courses in Moscow. His long short story *The Heirs* (preceded by the novel *Soldiers*) came out in the same year. Next came his story *The Divisionka* (1959), the novels *Cherry Pool* (1963) and *Bread Is the Stuff of Life* (1963), the story *Karyukha* (1967) and the novel *The Unweeping Willow* (1969-1975). Alexeyev is the chief editor of the *Moskva* journal and a State Prize winner.

Alexeyev chose this old Russian saying as the epigraph to one of his novels: "Without thought, there is no tale; without tears, there is no song." The author adheres to this and writes about what he knows thoroughly and about what he has experienced and felt for himself. "As I was born in the countryside, grew up there and then had my fill of the soldier's hard lot at the fronts in the Patriotic War, I could only write about war and cornfields," wrote Alexeyev in his autobiography. In the story *Karyukha* he recreates the life of the Russian countryside in the 20s, the countryside which parted with its past and strode boldly to meet the future.

KARYUKHA

1

Something had happened in our home; it was as though an invisible thread binding the whole big family together had suddenly been cut.

Dinner was now in three shifts. Grandad Mikhail, Grandma Olimpiada, their youngest son Pasha and his young wife Fenya were the first to take their places round the long table, scraped clean with a kitchen knife, which had formerly seated seventeen. The other thirteen waited their turn. And as the first shift didn't hurry themselves, they had to wait a long time, especially the last ones, us. I would not say that we all displayed an equal amount of patience. The grown-ups—yes, they busied themselves with various jobs, with apparent indifference. My mother, for instance, went out into the yard where she could always find something to do. Father trimmed his reddish moustache before the fly-blown mirror—this, it seemed, was the only suitable moment. My

sister Nastenka and my elder brothers Sanka and Lyonka avoided temptation by going outside, and passed the time playing "fillips" with such zest that they would finally come to table with red foreheads and a raised pattern of bumps on those same foreheads from fingers energetically flipped.

Only I, the youngest, just couldn't understand it all.

Every day I tried to clamber up to my very own place on grandad's right, but each time grandad's hand gently but very decidedly set me down again on the floor. I don't think those sitting at table found their appetites improved by the sight of my wide, hungry, puzzled eyes following the course of spoon to mouth and back again for a solid hour. It never entered my head that I was subjecting those grown-ups to a real psychological trial. But such was the case. The first to give up was Aunt Fenya, she would leave the table without waiting for the second course. Granny quietly followed her, and then came a great rattling at the stove. Only Uncle Pashka finished his meal, and he coughed incessantly, a strangled cough as though he were choking on something.

I did not leave my post. How was I to know that the piece of bread or meat followed by my devouring gaze stuck in their throats? I was hungry, that was all. Let them be glad I didn't set up a howl, but stood there in silence, now and then giving a snuffle or a quivering sigh. I could very well have howled; more than once I was not far from it. Sometimes mum would come back from the yard, give me a light cuff, pick me up and carry me off into the other room, away from temptation. There I would start playing and forget my hunger.

The second shift was Uncle Petrukha, Aunt Darya and their children—Ivan, Yegor, Lyubanka, Masha, Mishka, Fenya and somebody else (I cannot remember all their names now. I believe Aunt Darya had an infant, too; there were always two cradles in the front room swinging from hooks in the ceiling, and a baby squeaking in each). This second shift, the biggest, took the longest. Nobody hindered them, not even I, because from them I had definitely nothing to hope for.

When the sun neared midday, the table was cleared for us. We took our places noisily and a great bowl of

cabbage soup was set in the middle, fragrant steam rising from it in swirling clouds. Everyone set to. The animation round the table increased as we approached the great moment: the soup was almost finished, only the pieces of meat remained at the bottom, at any moment the order would be given: "Take it! " In former times grandad had given the order for all, but now, in our third shift, it was dad. You wait for the words and your hand shakes, your spoon drums the table. The slightest delay and your stomach will suffer for it, the best piece of meat will vanish before your lagging spoon scoops it up.

Some tried to anticipate events—usually my middle brother, Lyonka. He had a knack of snatching a piece of meat in the split second before the order came. Naturally, it was a risky undertaking. Often enough dad's hand armed with a big wooden spoon rewarded the violator of established order with a ringing crack on the forehead. Lyonka flinched, his face twisted but the meat won at painful cost was in his mouth. When everyone had eaten at the same time, Lyonka had managed his sleight of hand almost unnoticed; with seventeen spoons dipping into the bowl it is hard to distinguish one impelled by evil intentions. But now it was much more difficult, and all because of the division.

Talk about it had begun long ago, but not very seriously. They would talk a bit and then forget. But the winter before last there had been not only talk, but action. The white willows beside the orchard were cut down. Log walls began to rise at far ends of the village, and now two cottages stood almost ready for Uncle Petrukha's family and ours. So it was all settled. We still lived under one foor, but in three separate families. Food was cooked at one stove, but the food differed. In Uncle Pashka's small family it was better, in ours scantier and in Uncle Petrukha's scantier still, as though diluted to fill the greater number of mouths.

On the eve of the day I shall describe in greater detail, the heads of the three newly formed "social units" cast lots under the keen eye of Grandad Mikhail. Grandad cut three squares from a matchbox. On one he wrote "Bulanka", on another "Karyukha" and on the third "Lastochka". He dropped the three into a cap and

called his sons. They were waiting in the entry, unshaven, faces puffy from a sleepless night and strangely hostile to one another. The left side of dad's moustache twitched for some reason, he tried to bite the end but could not catch it. Uncle Petrukha rocked the cradle energetically although the child wasn't crying. Only Pavel tried to appear unconcerned and chaffed my father, telling him he was sure to draw Karyukha. Dad sent him to hell and threatened to knock his head in—and quite seriously, too. But when grandad called them, all that dropped off. Serious, pale, they went up to the cap.

"Well—draw."

"Nobody wanted to be the first. My father took a step forward, but at that moment Karyukha neighed out in the yard. It seemed like an omen and father shrank back. The last thing in the world he wanted was to draw Karyukha. In the eyes of her masters that mare possessed all the equine defects, imaginable and unimaginable. Judge for yourself: in the first place, she was old; secondly, lazy; thirdly, sly and ill-tempered—she could creep up behind you and give you a vicious nip for no reason whatsoever; fourth, she was a kicker, she could lash out with her hind legs so that you thought you'd flown to kingdom come; fifth, unsociable—take her out to night pasture, and she wouldn't feed with the other horses, not she, she'd go wandering off somewhere, it was surprising how she'd managed to escape the wolves' teeth. Perhaps her cunning saved her?

As against all these unpleasant qualities, and others too, she did have certain good points—a few, but quite important. She could get along on any kind of food, yet still remained sleek; she was slow but she had great endurance. And best of all, Karyukha foaled every year, and each time a filly.

Had she been able to talk to humans in their own language, she would probably have pointed out that all her good points arose, quite dialectically, from her defects. Had she not been lazy, had she dashed forward in the shafts at the first word from the driver, she would have worn herself out and never kept her fine sleekness or her excellent endurance. And it's no use being good-natured when there are other animals of all kinds in the yard, if you don't bite and kick you'll be left hungry,

and at any moment they may harness you to cart or sledge. For the same reason she was unsociable. If you get thin you won't want a mate, or foal every summer.

Nevertheless, in the division of property none of the brothers wanted Karyukha. Even Bulanka would be better. Karyukha and Bulanka were the two evils of which the least was preferred; after all, Bulanka was all of five years younger. Karyukha was her mother.

What everyone hoped for, of course, was Lastochka, an eighteen-month filly just ready to be broken into harness.

"Well, make a start, can't you?" Grandad was getting angry.

"Agh, in for a penny—" father growled; he dipped his hand irresolutely into the cap, fumbled for a long time with sweating, trembling fingers—but all the pieces were the same size.

We children, sitting on top of the big brick stove and watching with frightened, inquisitive eyes, shivered in anticipation.

Father somehow had a premonition he would draw Karyukha. All the same he glared at the slip, crushed it into fragments, let out a stifled groan like a man who has just received an undeserved, treacherous blow and ran outside. Mother wept softly, we snuffled and my elder brother Sanka cried loudly; Karyukha bit him more often than anyone else.

Bulanka fell to Uncle Petrukha and Lastochka to Uncle Pashka, the happy-go-lucky and therefore, it appeared, fortune's favourite. Actually, fate had been very fair, for grandad and grandmother would remain in the family of the youngest son. But from this time on it became very clear that for the three brothers with their wives and children to continue living under the paternal roof was out of the question.

That evening Karyukha, Bulanka and Lastochka were fastened up in three separate corners of the yard, and from then on, each had her own individual fodder.

The next morning we all went together for the last time to the threshing floor to finish the remains of the spring grain. The floor was already covered with tender, silky green; rye seeds were beginning to sprout in the cracks of the well-flattened earth. A few hens which had

ventured on the long journey were pecking at the foot of the unthreshed millet stack. Somebody's calf, too, had been enjoying itself, but had paid dearly for the meal. Its brown and white hide, tail and red ribs lay some twenty paces off. The head was somewhat apart, with only one eye; a crow had pecked out the other and was now sitting on a broken-off horn, resting before dealing with the remaining one. Father threw a broken flail handle at it. The crow flapped away lazily and settled again on the top of a solitary willow growing by the edge of the cemetery, where it sat cawing bad luck. Father picked up the flail handle, gave it to my brother Lyonka and told him to drive that bird away, a job very much after Lyonka's heart. The grown-ups set to work on the stack, and within a few minutes it was torn down and arranged in a large ring on the freshly swept floor.

Karyukha and Bulanka were harnessed to a stone roller. Lastochka began to crop the after-grass on the adjoining meadow. Now and then she looked askance at the remains of the calf and snorted. Karyukha turned a heavy head, looked at her daughter and nickered softly as though warning Lastochka not to go too far away. Occupied by uneasy thoughts, or perhaps just lazy as usual, Karyukha constantly lagged behind Bulanka and the side of the roller at the end of her traces dragged noticeably. My father was driving. At any other time his whip would have descended in no uncertain manner on Karyukha's round rump, but now he only cracked it and shouted, which Karyukha treated with sublime indifference.

Uncle Petrukha stood outside the ring swearing.

"What the—! Letting your horse take it easy while my Bulanka's in a lather! Lay on, I tell you! "

Father swung the whip and lashed both horses simultaneously.

Uncle Petrukha leaped into the ring, snatched the reins from his brother and began to lash Karyukha. She saw things were getting serious, her traces tightened and the roller levelled.

Father swore angrily and eloquently (he was great at that) and went off to the barn. There he rolled a giant cigarette and drew on it till sparks flew. I sat beside him and watched to see that none of them fell on the dry straw.

We threshed till late at night but still we didn't finish. The actual threshing was done, but the winnowing, sweeping and division into three unequal piles—according to the number of mouths—still remained.

Following grandad's advice, we spent the night in the threshing barn so that we could start on the millet at dawn, with no time wasted, and finish up by midday: divide the straw, the hay and the rye, oats, barley and millet grain, and give each family its own corner in the big threshing barn, its own borders which must henceforth not be crossed by any other.

The women went to the village and returned, each carrying a bundle. Three bundles. Three groups gathered round them. The biggest group was Uncle Petrukha's, the next was ours and the smallest Uncle Pashka's, just as it had been the previous day at table.

Barely had we settled down when our group received a considerable addition—considerable not in numbers but in capacity. Uncle Maxim who had married mum's elder sister, Orina, came along, squatted down by her bundle and offered his assistance. He was a big, good-natured man who could go without food for a week; but when he did sit down, he didn't rise again until everything was cleaned out, until Aunt Orina had taken the last pot out of the stove.

I could see that my mother was not very delighted to see her brother-in-law, but there was nothing she could do about it, the bundle was unfastened and Uncle Maxim took his place. His energetic help caused its contents to vanish rapidly. With a stolen sigh mum shook the last crumbs into her palm and tipped them into my readily opened mouth.

Darkness fell. All I could see was the moving red tips of dad's and Uncle Maxim's cigarettes. Maxim was the brother of Sergei Andreyevich Zvonaryov, a famous hunter, and had quite a reputation of his own. He had come to us from the forest where he had been selecting a good spot for the marksmen. There was to be a wolf hunt the next day, and Uncle Maxim and his brother were in charge of the whole affair. My father was to be in it, too, so now they were discussing various details.

I sat huddled close up to dad, listening to the talk, with the blissful chill of happy apprehension rippling

over my skin. For the first time in my life I was to be one of the beaters, the boys whose job it would be to drive the wolves into the hunters' ambush.

The other two families, Uncle Petrukha's and Uncle Pasha's, had settled down in other corners of the barn. I could hear the quiet talk of the women and grandad's muffled coughing. The horses tied up outside crunched their hay. Ivan, Yegorka and Sanka were to take turns watching over them. Ivan took the first shift. He sang to keep up his courage, but the calf torn to pieces by wolves was not exactly a cheering neighbour. Vanya's eyes kept turning uneasily in that direction—and he was certain he saw moving green sparks.

Actually, the wolves really were quite close. Soon we heard a howl—a long drawn-out moaning wail that sent a horrible chill down your back, an "oo-oo-oo" that rose into a high-pitched "a-a-ah!".

"By Far Crossing," said Uncle Maxim hoarsely.

"Aren't they closer? By Round Bush?" said father.

There was a tensely expectant silence.

Karyukha snorted by the gate, where she was tied.

"Like me to call them closer?"

Without waiting for an invitation, Uncle Maxim rose and left the barn. He squatted down on its blind side that faced the meadows and forest, clasped his hollowed hands, raised them to his face, closed his thumbs at the bridge of his nose and let out a sound that sent cold shudders down us and made the horses rear. For a moment there was silence, a silence so strained that had it lasted another second somebody would have broken it with a hysterical cry.

But a wolf answered. It was probably the leader of the pack, because the voice was deep, hoarse and senescently broken. Uncle Maxim waited a little, when gave another wolf howl. The horses danced, their red nostrils flared as they snorted. Vanya could not hold them alone, he was helped by Uncle Pasha who let out guffaws to keep up his courage and called over to the silent women, "Watch out, wives! They'll go for you first, women's meat's tenderer!" Uncle Maxim, hot-headed, hot-blooded, was carried away by his own devil-may-care mood. The women's voices coming from the barn only spurred him on to fresh efforts. Another howl sounded, quite

near, and he answered it himself. The sound had barely died away when green sparks shone in the meadow, close to the willow—the pack was almost beside the threshing floor. The leader howled again.

At that, the joker who had started this mad game made a leap for the barn yelling "wolves!" Uncle Pashka and Vanya followed, leaving the horses to their fate. I clutched father round the neck. Sanka and Lyonka climbed like cats to the rafters close under the roof and clung there silently. Aunt Darya, Aunt Fenya and my mother clung to Nastenka, Lyubasha and Masha in a frightened huddle, more dead than alive. Only Grandad Mikhail kept his head. With a few unflattering words about the uninvited instigator, he unfastened the horses and led them into the barn, shut the big gate and shot the bolt, a long tooth from an old harrow, and got out several pitchforks just to make assurance doubly sure.

Uncle Maxim, embarrassed and ashamed, clambered up on the crossbeam, found a hole in the roof and tried to see what the wolves' intentions were. But there weren't any wolves. Green sparks flickered far away. The wolves were on their way to Far Crossing, in the woods.

"They've gone," Uncle Maxim announced from his observation post, and then found he couldn't get down. The great jester's arms and legs were limp and weak, as though the bones had melted away.

"Come you down, Andreich, I've a word or two to say in your ear," grandad called, but Uncle Maxim didn't answer. He left the beam only when fear had given place to the boisterous gaiety usual in such situations.

People who only a short time ago had been in deadly terror, had seen and felt nothing else, now laughed and chaffed one another, mimicking in all detail who had behaved how as the danger approached. The picture which gradually emerged was comic rather than dramatic. Uncle Petrukha swore that after luring the wolves and clambering up on the crossbeam Maxim Andreyevich had wetted his pants and even sprayed my father, just underneath. Aunt Fenya, it was claimed, had pulled her skirts up over her head, burrowed into the grain and left her backside open for the wolves; Granny Olimpiada had loudly called on St. George to exercise his power over wolves and turn them away from her big family; Uncle

Pashka had burrowed a hole in the straw with amazing dexterity, emerging only when all the excitement had long died down. He certainly sneezed explosively from the dust in his nose.

When all had laughed away the nervous strain, grandad summed up impressively.

"And now, hark ye to me, Maxim Andreyevich, if you play a trick like that again you'll be threshed like straw, and by me, and hard. Get that? All right, then. Fine." He paused, breathing hard, calmed down and concluded, "And now—sleep. We start work at dawn."

He ordered the horses fastened outside again. Bulanka went meekly but Karyukha played up; she didn't want to go. Uncle Petrukha lashed her with the saddle girth, hit her with a broom, but she stubbornly stood her ground. Ears back, she rolled blazing eyes at her tormentor. Somebody had the good sense to guess that Lastochka should be led out first, then Karyukha would be eager to follow. That was what happened, although it didn't go quite smoothly, Karyukha's first idea being to keep Lastochka back, blocking her road, even giving her a nip, driving her away from the open gate and back into the barn. It was only when she failed that with an injured look and a deep sigh she followed her daughter out.

Inside the barn all slept. The horses dozed by the gate. All but Karyukha. Only she heard a she-wolf howl twice in the distance, somewhere by Kabelny Swamp, calling the pack as it slunk round the village. Karyukha pressed her big warm body close to her daughter, as though she knew that if danger came only she could protect Lastochka.

But nobody heard the uneasy sighing of old Karyukha.

2

At midday the hunters gathered on Small Meadow, just behind the village. Boys came running from all the streets and alleys armed with whips, rattles, drums, old buckets, watchmen's clappers and anything else which could make a noise, as loud and irritating as possible. I myself had a rattle, the kind that swings round a toothed stick; yesterday it had produced a fine imitation of a

machine-gun. The boys got their instructions from Sergei Andreyevich, Uncle Maxim's elder brother. His face was crimson with excitement and perhaps, too, from something pleasantly warm inside him; his hair, never combed, clung to his forehead in strands, even his grey beard flowed down wetly over his naked hairy chest; his eyes blazed under shaggy brows and I couldn't help thinking that any wolf meeting him face to face wouldn't feel very happy.

We boys were shown where to begin our drive and what direction to take. The hunters had already been given numbers. Number one was to stand by Far Crossing, on the edge of the forest, and the rest, twenty of them, were strung out to his right round the edge of the meadows, as far as Saltykov Hill.

Father was number five, the place where the wolves were most likely to appear. He was considered rather a good shot. He killed only birds in flight and running animals. To fire at a sitting bird or beast was regarded as a disgrace, a violation of hunting ethics.

We boys were strung out in a long line along the River Balanda, on the far side of the woods. At a given signal—a loud crack from a herdsman's whip—we advanced into the thickets. We knew for ourselves what we had to do. First, we let out desperate, high-pitched yells, partly to fight down certain natural apprehensions. Then we rattled, beat and banged with everything we had. The quiet, musing forest started awake, stirred uneasily. Crows and magpies flew high over the tree tops and increased the general disturbance. Our yard dogs joined us and added their barking and yelping to complete the impression of hell let loose. Everything living would flee in horror from the shouting, howling, whistling, barking horde with its instuments of fiendish noise.

Carried away and deafened by my own yelling, I raced ahead without a glance underfoot, like a soldier charging in an attack, stumbling, falling and picking myself up again, never noticing that the damp trickles running down my face were not only sweat but blood. Tough slender twigs whipped by cheeks and lips but I felt no pain. I didn't even hear the first occasional shots on the meadow somewhere far in front, but then they began coming more frequently, distinct gunshots. The

woods were still filled with "U-u-u-u-ah-ah-ah-u-u-u! " "Ulu-lu-lu-u-u! " "Tu-tu-tu! " "Ah-yah-yah! " There was one moment when I looked about me—right, left, in front, behind, and not a soul could I see, all were swallowed up by the forest. Then for the first time I really was scared, I yelled for all I was worth, but my yelling wasn't very aggressive.

A shot sounded quite close, I could even see the smoke through the sparse trees. Although terror had robbed me of most of my wits, by some instinct I fell prone and thus escaped a charge not meant for me. While I lay there another shot came, and another, and a third. Then—silence. I jumped up and ran to the edge of the woods, about two hundred metres to the left of Far Crossing. The boys had gathered into a jostling cluster, all trying to push forward to something in the middle. The hunters sat off to the side smoking, gesticulating, talking about the shoot.

Whatever happened, I had to get into the cluster of boys, for that was clearly the centre of interest. I was small even for my years, which came in handy; I dived through somebody's widely straddled legs and nearly pushed my nose into a wolf's jaws, the fangs bared in the moment of death, blood still dripping slowly. Beside it lay other dead beasts. I was rather disappointed. Wolves were not so very big and not at all terrible, it seemed strange that anyone could threaten us kids with them, that these were the creatures that were such a plague to peasant homes. Their faces looked friendly, like those of housedogs, I wanted to stroke them, but jumped back when a big lad gave a wolf growl just over my head. Then I went over to the hunters to listen to their talk.

"Only dry she-wolves and yearlings," Uncle Maxim growled in disgust. "Where are the big 'uns? Have we let them slip through? "

It was then I saw my father was not with the other hunters.

"Uncle Sergei, Uncle Maxim, where's my dad? "

"Eh? Aye, that's right, where's Nikolai? Eh? What if—? "

The hunters exchanged alarmed looks and rose.

Nothing had happened to my father except that he had failed to kill his wolf and had therefore been in no

hurry to get to the meeting place. He decided to wait a bit so as to escape gibes and jokes, and then make his way home unnoticed. He felt sick with himself. His hands still trembled, and that unpleasant shiver kept running through his whole body.

It was not just one wolf that had made for father, but a whole pack headed by the leader—perhaps the same which Uncle Maxim had lured to our threshing barn the previous night. The hunter first saw a six-months cub followed by four more beasts and hesitated about which to choose. Then, just when he should have fired he suddenly saw the leader, only ten paces away—a bull-headed, short-eared, hollow-flanked beast with a scorched yellow-white patch between the hind legs, broad-chested, his streamlined body, tense as a spring, turned towards the hunter. The beast paused a moment as though considering, his cold eyes sliding ominously over the man, then through grinning teeth barked a command to the pack. And again the hunter let the moment slip. The pack dispersed. The leader gave a great leap, slipped like a grey shadow through the thickets and vanished. Father fired at the place where twigs still crackled, but knew it was a wasted shot. Now he was filled with a sharp, insistent uneasiness—not the chagrin of a hunting failure, this doesn't leave an aching wound, but rather, that feeling which sometimes comes long before the hour of evil, the premonition of disaster which seeks to reach us first.

Father tried to smoke, but his fingers were not his own, they refused to obey him. Sombre thoughts chased one another through his mind. He remembered the recent division of property, remembered how he had drawn Karyukha, remembered with lively resentment how his elder brother snatched the reins from him and belaboured Karyukha but didn't touch his own Bulanka—he still couldn't understand why he had held back his hand from striking his brother; probably it was because grandad was there, for everyone stood in awe of him.

In a week's time his family would be moving into their own home. How would things go there? How long would Karyukha last? Would she foal at least once more, and leave a daughter to carry on—let her be lazy, so long as she could work and not tire. Nobody knew

whether Karyukha had mated, but it looked as though this year she would be dry.

Father rose on legs weak as they had been after typhus, threw his gun over his shoulder and went slowly towards home. From Far Crossing he could see the other hunters surrounded by a crowd of boys nearing the village.

A crescendo of barking met them.

3

So we settled into our new home—father, mother, Nastenka, Sanka, Lyonka, myself and Karyukha. Actually, Karyukha should come first. From now onward, all the fair and foul weather in our family was connected in one way or another with Karyukha, who performed a multitude of varied and important duties. Since it was now winter, the warmth of our house depended on Karyukha. It was she who brought in wood for the stove from the forest—at night, to avoid any undesired encounter with the forester. She was driven to the threshing barn for fodder, both for herself and for the other stock, which were also, in essence, her dependents. During the day, too, she was rarely out of the shafts; perhaps somebody needed help and father went with the horse, or he had to go to Chaadayevka village to buy lamp oil and a few biscuits for Christmas (the boys would be coming to praise Christ and there had to be something to slip into their hands); once a week father went to Balanda, the nearest town, and that was all of sixteen versts of very bad, iced-up road where the sledge would skid to the right or left, the shafts giving painful raps to Karyukha's legs so that for a day or two afterwards she would limp. But father never noticed anything wrong with her, he harnessed her up again and went off to the mill at Pantsirevka. He never came straight back home after grinding the rye or wheat, he had to take a glass with his friend the miller. One glass was followed by another until our dad forgot about everything in the world, including Karyukha. The horse knew from bitter experience what to expect and possessed her soul in patience. She would move to the leeward side of the miller's cottage, sink her

heavy head onto the earthen bank round it, let her weary legs go slack and doze off, standing, for an hour, a second, a third, a sixth—until her swaying master emerged on weak legs and plumped down on the sacks, as heavy and clumsy as they. "Hi up, there, Karyukha—giddap," he ordered when he had enough command of himself.

Karyukha didn't need any order, she knew what she had to do. Carefully, without haste, true to her custom of not overexerting under any circumstances, she backed a little to avoid breaking the window with a shaft, turned and moved out onto the road. Father fell asleep at once. When Karyukha came home she opened the gate herself, pulled the sledge of sacks to the middle of the yard and called us with a soft whinney. Mum and my elder brothers ran out, carried father in, then brought in the sacks of flour. Karyukha was quite satisfied; until the master sobered up nobody would harness her, she was safe at least till morning, she could rest at last and munch hay, and perhaps even a few oats, which would be excellent.

During the spring floods travelling practically stopped. Karyukha was given extra food. She knew the reason. Spring sowing. She would be pulling the plough or harrow from early dawn till darkness fell. Karyukha was not in foal. Everyone knew that now, and the whip descended on her back more frequently. She had good cause to regret not having found herself a mate. It was never her custom to ask permission, she made her own choice and found a mate wherever she might—on the meadows, on the steppe, on the night pastures. There could be no question of pedigree with any of her descendants, they were whatever God might send. And God was not particularly generous, he sent foals of breeds as unkown as those of chance-met stallions let out by their masters and fully available to equally unwatched mares. We had long noticed that not one of Karyukha's foals resembled her. You could say of each one, without any flattery: "The image of his sire! " As time went on, dad drew definite and far-reaching conclusions from this circumstance, but of that more later.

So as we see, in addition to hauling, ploughing, sowing and harvesting, Karyukha was expected to produce a

foal every year. In the first year after we moved into our new home she failed to do so, and felt the whip more than ever.

In new surroundings Karyukha gradually established her relations with all the members of our family, relations that differed markedly. Father, the master, she definitely did not like, and she had reason: he used the whip much oftener than need be if his actions had been guided by good sense; there were those nocturnal drinking parties of which Karyukha got only the hangover, since it was she who was compelled either to stand all night at some strange house or take her master's drunken cronies home, and sometimes, spurred on by angry shouts and her master's whip on her back, to act the part of a racer which she had never been and never could be; in particular, she hated his horrible habit of pushing his drunken mouth into her face and mumbling stupid things—Karyukha always badly wanted to bite those wet, protruding lips, but she refrained for fear of the consequences. One more reason why she disliked father: she had to fear him, and it is difficult to love what keeps you in fear.

From Karyukha's point of view, her best friend should have been our mother. Mum was kind and gentle, and extraordinarily thoughtful not only for us, her children, but for all the animals in our yard. Karyukha she always called our provider, because it really was Karyukha who provided for the family. Mum fed Karyukha, and on long winter nights she would go out several times to see the horse was all right; when father wasn't looking she would mix a few handfuls of rye flour with the bran. Karyukha never laid her ears back when mum came, as she always did with anybody else; she would micker softly and then—in gratitude?—rub her mistress' shoulder with her velvety-soft upper lip. But all the same, you couldn't say that mum had any very great authority over Karyukha. If she was the only person in the cart or sledge, Karyukha let her laziness have free rein with on concealment whatever.

"Come on, girl, giddap! " mum would say; she might crack the whip and sometimes even let it descend on the horse's crupper, but Karyukha didn't twitch an ear. She had no malicious intent, she simply took advantage of

the rare chance to rest and conserve her strength against worse times. These came much oftener.

Karyukha regarded my elder brother Sanka in much the same way as my father. Sanka actually resembled father in character and ways, he was equally hot-headed and impatient, and even more violent. It was not surprising that Karyukha had no very friendly feelings for him. She did not hide the fact. Twice she had bitten him viciously, and once nearly kicked him when she was grazing on the meadow and he had tried to bridle her. She paid dearly for that. Father and son chased her about the yard a good two hours, slashing at her with twigs and whip until in her fright she rushed at the fence and nearly spiked herself on a post. Mum's desperate cries when she rushed outside cooled the tempers of Karyukha's tormentors.

Cursing under their breath with a sort of shame for their mad rage, they followed mum into the house, and at the supper table discussed endlessly how they would sell Karyukha, durn her, in the autumn. Mum, Lyonka and I said nothing as we flourished our spoons. We knew that these ominous plans would soon fade away, Karyukha would remain in our yard and continue to do all the main work—she would haul cart and sledge, plough, sow, bring in the harvest and give us a foal the next summer.

Karyukha got on best with Lyonka. This fifteen-year-old was simple and kind in the extreme. Karyukha could not remember his ever striking her, or even brandishing the whip. In addition, Lyonka had a duty equally pleasant for him and for her: it was he who took her out to night pasture.

Karyukha, who was not hobbled like the rest of the horses, at once went off some distance as her way was and enjoyed the fresh grass alone, while Lyonka, carefree, played with the other boys. He would remove a sock, stuff it tightly with couch-grass, call his friends and set the game going. They called it "pole-cat" or "catch the pole-cat"—which is the more exact definition. The boys sat down in a circle, their feet meeting in the middle, threw some sacking over and made the "pole-cat"—the filled sock—disappear under it. The "pole-cat", concealed, went from lad to lad while one of them ran round the circle trying to catch somebody with it. When

he made a false grab, the "pole-cat" at once jumped up and gave him a good thump, to the delighted yells of the others. With a groan the pursuer would dash off again in a chase which usually lasted a long time, for the "pole-cat" was elusive. When at last it was caught, the one from whose hands it had been snatched had to take the place of the panting pursuer.

The game often lasted till dawn. When most of the boys fell asleep, the others played practical jokes on them which were not always too pleasant. They might fasten the sleeper to a horse's tail, or smear his face with tar. I remember Lyonka nearly always came home black, but there was a happy smile on his round face and his teeth looked very white. Had there not been these rough practical jokes, the night pasturing would have lost much of its attraction for my brother and his friends.

Karyukha, as I have said, was likewise well satisfied. So she and Lyonka were good friends.

Of me, the youngest, Karyukha took no notice whatever, even when I got onto her back, clutched her mane, shouted at her and drummed my bare heels on her broad sides. However, a little later a job was found for me too—in the summer I had to take Karyukha to Kochki Pond, the closest to our village, and wash her. Karyukha went into the water until only her head and a narrow strip of back showed above the surface. Naked, I wriggled up and down that strip, rubbed her right and left with my hands and scrubbed her gadfly-bitten sides with my fingers, while she stood quietly, giving small grunts of content. When she had had enough of the water she carried me back to the bank and then made for home at a gallop, a rare thing for her, leaving wet splashes in the dust. In the yard she gave her skin such a shaking and twitching that I somersaulted off and ran back to the pond to have a bathe on my own account. Sometimes father sent me to the meadow to fetch Karyukha, but then I came back alone; Karyukha wouldn't let me come near her. She would lay back her ears and bare her teeth like a dog, as much as to say: You just try it, my lad, and see what you get! What I would get was likely to be decidedly unpleasant, so I retreated meekly.

One Saturday night Lyonka took me with him to the pasture. To my great delight he made the offer himself,

without my having to beg and plead all day first, as I usually did when Lyonka and his friends were going somewhere. We left while it was still light. By the very last threshing barn, where the village ended, we caught a speckled hen which had incautiously strayed. With the speed and skill of a fox Lyonka cut off her head, stuffed her into a sack and got back onto Karyukha whom we were riding double, with me in front held firmly by the reins and his elbows, clutching the mane for extra security.

The horses were hobbled and set free to graze, Karyukha as usual wandering off alone. Lyonka and his gang got to work boiling the chicken. They scooped up a pan of water from Pravikov Pond, fixed it on a tripod, broke up last year's dry sunflower stalks for a fire, and soon the pot was boiling. Just as everything was about ready Mishka Zemskov, a young fellow of twenty-five and clever as a monkey, came strolling up. He sniffed greedily and grinned.

"So you've got a hen, eh? H'm—I see...."

"Sit down and have some," said Lyonka.

"Don't mind if I do," Mishka agreed graciously. "But how'll you eat the broth? Got no spoons? "

No, we had no spoons.

"Oh, there's always a way."

Mishka selected a strong, dry sunflower stalk and pushed out the cottony pith with a slender twig, making a long tube. He blew through it once or twice, held it to his one eye (he had lost the other in unknown circumstances), peered through it like a spyglass for a long time, let out a satisfied grunt, put the end of the tube into the broth and sucked. We waited in expectant silence.

"Does it draw? " asked Lyonka.

"No, I can't get naught," said Mishka, removing the tube from his mouth for a moment. "I'll have another try."

He had another try, while we stood by licking our lips. The broth was slowly but surely sinking, while the chicken seemed to rise up—first the feet, then breastbone and finally the whole bird.

"Hi—he's drunk it all! " shouted Lyonka at the top of his voice, but the warning came too late. The broth was gone.

To make the plunder complete, Mishka plunged both hands down, gave a jerk and brought them up holding the two drumsticks. The body with two miserable wings flopped back into the empty pot.

"You can thank me for not telling Katka Dubovka. It was her hen."

With those parting words Mishka made off, finishing the drumsticks on his way home.

It was our unlucky night: both Lyonka and I were smeared with pitch. But that didn't bother us, we expected it. The really memorable happening was the next day, when we went hunting stone-martins' eggs in the gully that ran from Pravikov Pond. There were plenty of nests in the sheer sides of the deep gully, but the openings were too narrow for Lyonka's hands or those of any of the gang. They decided to make use of me, since I was the smallest and consequently had smaller hands. Two lads held me by the left arm, let me down as far as they could, and with my right hand I felt in the hole, collected any eggs I found and slipped them into my right-hand pocket, the only one in a village boy's trousers.

The search went well. Metre by metre we combed the yellow pock-marked side and our caps gradually filled with eggs. For the hundredth time, or so it seemed, I hung over the deep drop, held up by the strong hands of Lyonka and someone else. At first I had been too frightened to look down, but now I suddenly wanted to see the bottom. I looked, and froze in sheer horror. In a small circle at the base of the steep cliff a big she-wolf lay stretched out like a dog. Cubs tumbled by her whitish belly—how many I did not see and was certainly in no state of mind to count. What mattered was that the den was just underneath me. Somehow, I had wits enough not to tell the boys while I was still hanging there, the shock might slacken their grip. So first I said quietly, "Pull me up. Nothing here."

Then, safely on top, I pointed at the she-wolf.

Lyonka's friends, and he with them, made off at such a pace I couldn't keep up with them. Then I got a stitch, stood still and bawled. Lyonka conquered his fright, came back, picked me up and flung me onto the back of Karyukha, this time hobbled. He jumped up

behind me and lashed the mare. Karyukha sensed something very alarming and tried to run, but hobbled as she was, she lagged behing the other horses. Lyonka should have got down and taken off the hobbles, but he was too frightened. We both felt as though the she-wolf was right on our heels. Somehow or other we got to the cemetery where the others were waiting for us.

As soon as we got home we told of the wolf. Father, Uncle Maxim, Uncle Sergei and, I believe, Uncle Petrukha, set off at once for the den, but both mother and cubs were gone. All they found was gnawed sheep bones and tufts of wolf fur.

The she-wolf drew the correct conclusion from our sudden appearance in her chosen locality. We did the same. At any rate, from that day on we stopped looking for martins' eggs in Pravikov Gully or anywhere nearby. And we found other places for the horses to graze at night.

Father took the opportunity to say some grim words to our sister who most unexpectedly—to us and our parents, at least—had become a grown girl and now came home later and later from gatherings of the young folks.

"And you—came in last night at one o'clock again. And why didn't you shut the gate? If the cow Ryzhonka or Karyukha get out and the wolves catch them, you look out for yourself, ye hussy! "

Nastenka knew why she hadn't shut the gate. It had its tricks, that gate, it opened quietly but when you shut it it gave a high-pitched creak that wakened everybody in the house. The last thing Nastenka wanted was for father to know what time she came home. But the one who kept her out so late cared nothing for her father's sternness, or the creaking gate, or Ryzhonka and Karyukha who might wander out to the threshing floor and fall easy prey to the slinking grey shadows. He loved Nastenka and quite rightly considered that nothing in the world was more important than this sacred right of love. He wanted Nastenka to stay with him all night, till the last cock-crow, till sunrise, and Nastenka submitted because she wanted the same.

The egoism of lovers is boundless. It's high time people knew that.

As for Karyukha, Nastenka's romance was all to the

good for her. Karyukha liked to wander about in freedom; she might always find something good here or there, and could escape two or three turns in the shafts. Let them blame whom they would, it was none of her fault.

So the life of our family went its way.

4

I used to call my sister "nursie". She was ten years older than me and actually had looked after me when I was little. But I hated it when Nastenka told her friends about it, especially when she said I'd been a dreadful cry-baby, given no one any peace, and it had pulled her arms out of their sockets, soothing me. I tried to picture her with her arms out of their sockets, but couldn't. Then I began to drop calling her "nursie", I was ashamed, and finally stopped altogether and called her Nastenka, as my brothers did. It was only when she got a boy friend and I felt my nose out of joint that I started calling her "nursie" again; I made a point of doing it when the boy friend was there, and she hated it. The word "nursie" made her feel old, and seventeen-year-old Nastenka wanted to be young. Very possibly I was jealous in my own way and was trying, if not to avert, at least to postpone the irrevocable event coming rapidly closer. I started frankly spying on my sister. I would pop up out of the darkness at the most awkward moment, run to the log where the two of them always sat and call out very loudly, very audibly in the listening night when every rustle was audible:

"Nursie, you've got to go home. Nursie, dad's calling you! Nursie! "

For some time the couple stayed where they were, apparently oblivious. But I yelled a second time, and a third, until I hunted them from the spot. I let them get far enough away not to see me. They would find what they believed to be a hidden spot and sit down to bill and coo, but after five minutes or so I'd be there again.

"Nursie, you've got to go home! Dad's calling you!"

Had I not been Nastenka's brother, and a small brother at that, the young man would have pulled my ears

with great pleasure, but he bore it all. Not Nastenka—not always. Once she jumped up from the log and gave me a richly deserved cuff. But she couldn't stay out any longer. Very soon she said an abrupt goodbye and went angrily home. Then in the night I heard her crying and when I looked at her bed in the morning I saw the pillow was still damp. I hated myself. I ran to my sister who was gazing absently out of the window, flung my arms round her neck and kissed her, and almost crying myself, begged her to forgive me and said I'd never, never do it again and I loved her awf'ly much. She hugged me so tightly that I was almost smothered, and burst out crying again, but this time her tears were easy, they did not weigh like a stone on her heart; as she blinked them off her long dark golden lashes she was already smiling, and with that smile she seemed to blossom like a dew-covered flower opening in the morning sun. And we both felt happier than words could tell.

After that morning, we were real friends.

My love for my sister found expression in any services I could do her. First of all I got hold of some grease and lavishly anointed that gate to stop it creaking. And in addition, in the dead of night when all were sound asleep I slipped quietly out to wait for my sister by our house. If it was summer I helped her to climb in through the living-room window; mum and dad slept in the room she would have to pass through if she entered by the door. In winter I would open the door, let my sister go first and when someone called "Who's there?" answered that it was I, I'd had to go to the outhouse. All that was fine, couldn't be better. But Lyonka's and Sanka's teasing was another matter. Sanka wasn't so bad, he didn't laugh very often and when he did, it wasn't unkind. But not so with Lyonka. Mopping and mowing, he mimicked Nastenka's boy so aptly that everybody roared with laughter. Even mum, meek and cowed forever under the iron heel of her domineering husband—even her lips wrinkled and her eyes narrowed in a hidden smile. I laughed too, although I knew it was treachery; but I couldn't help it. Lyonka would have made a fine comedian.

For Nastenka, however, it was no laughing matter. First she snatched up fire-tongs or pan-holder and chased Lyonka round the house, trying to crack him on the

back. But a fine chance she had of catching him! Lyonka was quick-footed and slippery as an eel. At last, exhausted, she fell face down on her bed and her shoulders shook convulsively. Then silence fell, except for mum scolding Lyonka.

"Now may the devil's imps fly off wi' you! Why can't you let the girl alone, you plague and torment? I'll give you—." She picked up the tongs or pan-holder Nastenka had dropped.

Lyonka snatched a hunk of bread from the shelf, dived past her to the door, shot out—and was gone.

It was no rare thing for father to come home after midnight from a drinking party. Then he always went into the living room, lighted a match, glared at his daughter's empty bed with glazed, drunken eyes and, seizing on the excuse, started on mother.

"Takes after you. The same kind of strumpet. Well, where's she gone?"

"How do I know?" mum answered, getting hastily down from the stove.

The storm was coming close and mum hurried to seek the protection of her sons, lying on the floor under her sheepskin coat. We too were awake, listening alertly, to see how far father would go in his unprovoked rage. We were getting bigger now and father knew he would scarcely be able to lash out with his fists as he used to do when we were all small.

"Takes after me, indeed," mum repeated quietly, well understanding what her husband meant. "Isn't it more after you? In your forties, and ramping and roaring! Off carousing till midnight like some young fellow. Have shame before the children, at least!"

"Shut up!" father bawled.

That rasping "shut up" was our alarm signal. In an instant we were all by the bully. I locked my arms round his neck, Sanka grabbed his right arm and Lyonka his left—tactics which had all been worked out. Father tried to shake us off, but his bellowing began to die down, we dragged him into the other room, threw him down, laughing, on our simple bed—straw covered by ragged sacking, lay down beside him, and thus diverted the storm from our poor mother.

Sometimes, however, the storm came during the day

when we boys were not at home. Mother and daughter, caught unawares, huddled as far back as they could on top of the stove, and there father dealt with them undisturbed. He used a rope halter, doubled. Mum, who would risk anything to protect her child, shielded Nastenka with her own body and held out her bruised, swollen arms to take the vicious blows that rained down. The wild screams of his victims lashed the drunken bully to a frenzy, it was a wonder he hadn't yet beaten them to death. Mum was sure that this was why he found fault all the time with Nastenka—he wanted a pretext to settle accounts with his wife. And those accounts existed. Mum had been forced into marriage with him; she had tried to hang herself, because she loved another. This father could never forgive as long as he lived, and it was actually the cause of some very bad times for all of us. When we were part of a big family, the presence of grandad, grandma and other people had to some extent ameliorated the cruelty of fate which had bound together two who had no love for one another; now, however, when father was the sole master, the ruler, there were only us three boys to divert his blows from mother and sister. And we were not always at home.

Father's savage fits always came when he was drunk. In the morning, sober, he was ashamed, and hurried out into the yard without waiting for breakfast, avoiding all eyes. For the next week he didn't drink at all. It was a real holiday for the family. All day there was laughter in the house. Nastenka's girl friends would come for a night sewing party. Some of them brought their own spinning wheels. They spun wool or hemp, or knitted shawls, stockings and mittens. They chattered and sang songs. Father, grown young again, was in the front room with the young fellows who hovered round the girls, he vied with them in telling funny stories, and helped one-eyed Mishka Zemskov to draw caricatures of the girls and boys.

Karyukha, too, was pleased. For that week she was never harnessed at night. And the master never pressed a foul-smelling slobbering mouth to hers.

When Karyukha was at home, it was mum who fed her. In fact, she looked after all the animals, although she could easily have given the job to Sanka and Lyonka. They could have gone to the threshing floor too, but this

time it was father who didn't trust them. He never let anyone else go there in winter, and for a good reason. His sons didn't know what and how much grain, what straw and how much should be packed into the willow baskets; they might grab the oat straw, and that had to be saved for spring, and spring was a long way off. The hay in particular had to be used very sparingly; soon lambing would begin, and Ryzhonka would calve, and you couldn't feed straw to lambs or a calf, they must have fragrant hay powdered with bran and a little rye flour. You couldn't give them sedge except for bedding. And it didn't hurt to be careful with the millet straw, too, mainly because of Ryzhonka, she was fond of it. In January the rye and barley straw had to be used, and grain of the same, but on no account the millet and oat straw, which was equal to hay.

How could his thoughtless sons know about all this?

But that was not the end of it. When the sledge was loaded with fodder, father returned to the barn, rested a while and had a smoke, carefully, shielding the cigarette in his hand and drawing in, together with the smoke, the fragrant, appetising smell which was a blend of many almost indistinguishable smells—straw, grain and hay; then he would take the rake and without haste clean up his corner, so that not one blade of grass, not one empty ear, not one dry leaf or scrap of hay remained underfoot. He raked, cleared away, then smoothed everything over with the back of the rake in such a way that nobody else could touch anything without his knowing. For two other owners visited the threshing barn.

But what about Karyukha? It was very hard for her in the spring, with no Bulanka beside her. The wooden plough she could manage, that had always been pulled by one horse. But the single-share metal plough—that had been hard work even for two. Karyukha tried guile; every ten or fifteen paces she would stop, her sweating sides heaving, and look back at the ploughman to guess his intentions: if he looked grim and the whip was ready, Karyukha would limit her stop to a moment, but if the ploughman began to wipe his wet forehead with the tail of his shirt, Karyukha could rest longer. This, however, seldom happened. The ploughman was in haste, every stop was a threat of hunger to his family, he'd no time

to pity a horse. By midday Karyukha stopped finally, and not from any guile; she was so tired that her straining legs trembled, and lash her as you would, Karyukha would stand rooted. Once she simply collapsed in the traces, and only then her master, wretched and despondent, realised that he would have to unharness her, even if only for an hour.

After this, father turned morose and thoughtful. Although he said nothing, we all felt he had some plan up his sleeve. As soon as the sowing was done he began to feed Karyukha up, putting weight on her.

"Can he be thinking of selling the old horse?" mum said to us despondently, badly worried by the idea. "Boys, try to talk him out of it. We'll be lost without Karyukha. He'll let her go for a song, drink the money and we'll be left without a horse. And what'll we do then?"

We ourselves were alarmed. No wonder, if you took father's ways into account. He was capable of anything.

But father's plan was a very different one.

5

One night he came home after midnight—sober, for a wonder, and spoke with a gentleness which was a wonder even greater.

"Are you asleep, mother? Get up, then, we've got to talk."

He shut the living-room door, and we could hear nothing. Twice mum went out into the entry, opened a trunk and got out a bundle from the very bottom. In the darkness we could hear the crisp rustle of notes and mum's whisper: "He'll ruin us, for sure. The very idea...." She vanished and through the door, left ajar, there came sounds of an argument, at first mild, but increasing in anger.

"He'll strip tha last rag off our backs! Thirty rubles—it's ruination! You could buy a year-old for that."

"What do you know about it, you silly woman? In two years we'll have our money back and doubled."

"Doubled. Shovel it in, get a sack."

"Agh, penny-pincher, not a thought in your head. I'll settle it myself, then."

But what he was settling we didn't know. Mum gave way as she always did, and their talk sank to whispers, a peaceable discussion—it was a long time since we'd heard father speak so gently. Mum, who had put the bundle back into the trunk, came and got it out again. Again there was the crisp rustle of money. Father coughed, mum sighed heavily. The money came from the sale of the calf the previous autumn, and she had been saving it for Nastenka's dowry. She counted it three times a day, afraid that one of us might snitch something, and sighed as she did now. Only a short time ago she had added another ten rubles, got for a big jar of hemp oil she had sold at the Balanda market. Only once had we boys been given any. The thick dark-green oil, always tasty, had been particularly fragrant.

In addition to the ten-ruble note there had been some smaller money, but father had taken it and bought a dram for a long trip. He had confessed to mum afterwards; she said nothing, just sighed. In a few days there should be more additions to mum's bundle; for some days a big tub had stood behind the stove making sounds like an old man clearing his throat. That tub held something that could fuddle heads and make hearts merry for a time at least. Home-distilled vodka was likewise for sale.

The next morning father took not three, but two ten-ruble notes from the bundle and went out without waiting for breakfast. He was gone a long time. Mum kept looking out of the window to see if he was coming, and for some reason often knelt down before the icons. "Holy Virgin, have compassion on us, save us and bless us," her dry, withered lips murmured, barely audibly. I had long ago observed that in all life's vicissitudes mum appealed not to God, but to the Virgin, as she was doing now. But on this particular day the Blessed Virgin seemed to have other affairs on her mind and didn't hear mum's prayers.

Father returned black as thunder. He didn't come into the house at once; he jerked up and down the yard, patted Karyukha's neck. Then he stood still, thinking, apparently made a final decision and came to the house. Without a word to mum who was standing by the stove in agitated silence, he almost ran into the living room, opened the trunk and took out the last ten-ruble note.

Then he dashed out, his head down like a charging bull, to avoid hearing any protest or seeing any tears. This time he was very soon back. Again he went round the whole yard. He led Karyukha from the shed, ran her round several times in a circle, fastened her firmly to the gatepost, and stroked and patted her for a long time, mumbling something very affectionate in Karyukha's pricked ear. In fact, he behaved as one might to a girl for whom an excellent match had been arranged, one which would bring happiness not only to the bride but to her whole family. But with all this, there was deep worry and care on father's face. Of all the questions which ranged up before him each day, only one now faced him—the most important, the decisive question: Would Karyukha stand for the grey? The money had been paid over in advance, and all father would owe was the drink to seal the bargain that was to come after the grey had covered Karyukha, when with a mite of optimism one might say that now everything was all right.

Father went inside.

"Fry some potatoes with fat pork, Mother," he ordered. "They'll soon be here."

The cottage came alive. Mum ran to the keeping cellar. We three lads ran outside and found ourselves places—one on the fence, another on the earth bank round the house, while I clambered up to the shed roof and waited, although I didn't really understand what I was expecting.

"They're coming! They're coming! " I yelled, the first to see from my look-out place two husky men leading a grey stallion out of an alley. Father dashed into the yard and opened the gate. The handsome horse neighed impatiently. The men holding him braced their feet but the stallion lifted his head and swung them along as though they were feather-light. Karyukha fidgeted, raised her head and a ripple of shudders ran along her body, followed by a long, timorously happy, impatient, summoning whinny. Hearing that call, seeing Karyukha dancing on the halter like a filly, father's face glowed with a childishly foolish, blissful smile.

"Thank God, thank God," he said.

All of a sudden our big yard seemed small and cramped as the great stallion, dancing and rearing, galloped in.

The fowls flew onto the roofs and fence with a mighty squawking and flapping, and black yard-dog Rascal gave one conscientious but apprehensive yip, dived under the wicket gate and then from the safety of the vegetable plot barked his head off shrilly. And to complete the inferno a pig ran out under the stallion's forelegs; the horse reared and neighed, his smooth veined belly quivering; the pig grunted and tried to follow Rascal under the wicket but got stuck and squealed to high heaven. Father gave it a whack with the flat of a spade and the wicket was torn off its hinges. Wild porcine squeals filled the plot.

"Well, Nikolai Mikhailych, it's up to you, see you don't make a mess of it! "

With these words the grey's owner Mikhaila and his son, holding the bridle with difficulty, led him to Karyukha, who now stood there looking very small and meek. The stallion rose lightly over her crupper, bared his teeth, bent his steeply curving neck and savagely closed his long yellow teeth on Karyukha's mane. But at this moment the stallion, stall-fed, impatient, burning with love, evidently needed a bit of help, and father lost his head, he failed to do what was necessary. Limp and depleted, the stallion came down heavily on the ground. Karyukha laid her ears back and kicked him painfully. His angry master pushed aside father, who was still vainly trying to repair matters, and led his horse to the gate.

"I told you to keep your wits about you. Blame yourself," Mikhaila growled angrily. "He won't rise a second time. And anyway, you'd have to pay again. So...."

I had always thought father, if not too strong, was at least too proud to stomach harsh words. He had been a brave soldier in the First World War and a bold fighter in the Civil War. Nobody could call him meek. But look at him now! Trembling, pitiful, almost in tears, he clutched Mikhaila's jacket.

"Neighbour, neighbour—don't ruin me, think of my children! "

"I can't and it's no good asking, Nikolai Mikhailych."

But help was coming. Mum, feeling in her bones something was wrong, quickly filled a big mug of home-distilled, laid a slice of pork fat on a piece of black bread and ran out into the yard. She blocked Mikhaila's way, pleading, insistent.

"Eh, but neighbour, dear man, you can't refuse—try the first of the batch, distilled just this very night.... And what's your hurry? There's fried eggs ready, and potatoes with pork ... Come inside a mite, dear man! "

"Well, well, neighbour—just to please you, I'll take one swallow of it."

It was a true word he spoke, for a single swallow, or so it seemed, was enough to empty that litre pot. Something gurgled in his throat, he coughed and cleared it pleasurably, sniffed the black bread and pork and returned it to mum. Then he handed the stallion over to his son and as though he had thus given his blessing to anything further that might take place, walked slowly indoors, enticed by the fragrant smell.

Father prudently stayed in the yard. He and Mikhaila's son patted the stallion's great body, then led him about the yard for a long time in sight of Karyukha and finally got him quieted. His great eyes began to roll towards the mare, then reddened again, his nostrils flared, steamed, and his whole magnificent body quivered and shook to a mighty, challenging neigh. Karyukha answered, softly and submissively. The grey broke away from the men holding him and rushed towards his lady-love, and this time father was ready.

Soon after this, the young fellow led the stallion home. But Mikhaila remained with us. In time a good dozen men dropped in to join the party. They drank all day, all evening and all night, it was a real carouse, a real wedding feast for Karyukha. And she, quiet and content, stood tied in the same spot waiting patiently for them to finish their celebrating, come outside, and throw down some fodder for her or maybe lead her to the paddock opposite our house, hobble her and leave her to graze.

Karyukha now had no further desire.

The men renewed their celebrations the next day. A couple of hours after leaving, Mikhaila came back for a hair of the dog. And an hour or so later the rest appeared with the same idea.

Again father and mum gave all their attention to the eternally tipsy and amusing Mikhaila, again he was the honoured guest. And he took it as a matter of course, the right and proper thing. He increased father's already heady bliss by tirelessly narrating all the real and imagin-

ed perfections of his racer, and to encourage neighbourly generosity in the matter of home-distilled he swore that his stallion always sired fillies, and invariably they resembled their father in size and colour. He even promised to return us the thirty rubles if his words didn't come true.

"Nay, Mikhaila! Of course we believe you! Christ's blessing on you, we'll never forget your goodness," mum protested, bringing another quart intended for market from the cellar.

Father, not to be behindhand, poured out gratitude in his turn.

"Come again, come often, neighbour. Let it be as it will for others, but for you we'll always find a glass or two."

I watched and listened from my favourite place on top of the stove, a place I liked not only in winter but in summer too. It seemed to me the other men ought to feel offended, for no attention was paid to them at all. But they showed no sign of it. They had come to the party unbidden, returned the following day in the same way, they were allowed to stay, let them be grateful for that.

Despite all mum's efforts to end it, "Karyukha's day" lasted a whole week. As for Mikhaila, he now found it not only fitting but his good right to come every Saturday, to "have a bit of a drink after a steam bath". After all, a man who has done you such a great favour has every reason to expect that much from you!

My parents, mum in the first place, were rather troubled by something which at first glance might seem of little importance. Neighbour Mikhaila seldom came alone, he had to have somebody in addition to father, who by force of circumstances became his boon companion. Usually he brought Spirka, a lean man and a confirmed drunkard. Since the man I mean is still alive, I will not give his real name, but use another.

Very naturally Spirka (short for Spiridon) tumbled into plenty of ridiculous situations as he moved through life on the insecure ground of drink. I happened to witness one of them.

One morning, seeing that the cooperative shop was open—he had probably been awaiting that moment with

burning impatience—Spirka made straight for it. His lean body shaking, teeth chattering, he fumbled for a long time with stiff fingers in the band of his quilted trousers, trousers notable for the fact that he wore them in all weathers, forty degrees of frost or forty degrees of heat. They hung with alarming insecurity owing to the shrunken narrowness of their owner's hips. Well, he felt for and found a ruble, then with some difficulty and great care (fancy if he tore it!) smoothed out the faded paper with the printing almost worn away, and laid it on the counter.

"Gimme a good glass, Maxim lad."

The salesman filled the glass three quarters, as much as was due. Not trusting one hand, Spirka used his left too, and raised the glass to his mouth without a second's delay. But either he was in too great a hurry, or it went down the wrong way anyhow, the stream of vodka poured into his throat came back, and down onto the floor. Spirka tried to say something, but the words were choked by a fit of coughing that brought tears streaming down his face. When he recovered his breath he cursed wholeheartedly and placed his misfortune on a social basis.

"Just look, Maxim—there's Mikhaila, now, he doesn't vomit it up, because he's rich! But us poor folks, everything goes wrong for us! "

Spirka's words might have been correctly applied to anyone but himself. Spirka would have been a beggar in any kind of society, because he drank away not only all his money but anything he could take out of the house and sell. It would have been more than unjust to blame a government for this situation.

Nevertheless, Spirka did look miserable. Either his looks or his words had their effect on the salesman; he poured another glass, this time on credit which would certainly never be paid, and gave the poor fellow his drink.

This was the man whom Mikhaila always brought when he came to us for a glass. After a while mum began to get heartily sick of these constant visitors, I could see it, but she didn't know how to get rid of them. Or to be exact, she knew all right, but was afraid of her husband's anger. Mum was evidently on the rack

and I decided to help her. At the height of carouse I chose my moment and in my loudest voice, with the devastating frankness of a small boy, shouted a brutal but justified question at the owner of the handsome racer:

"Uncle Misha, why are you always coming here now?"

Taken aback by the blunt question, he made no answer but sat staring at me, red-eyed. From my observation post I could see father slowly swell with rage, the very hairs on his head seemed to bristle. Mum crossed herself.

"Why, are you tired of me?" Mikhaila asked at last in a hoarse, embarrassed voice.

"Yes, we are!" I blurted out.

Father thrashed me, of course, but the thing was done. Mikhaila still came, but much more seldom, once in two weeks or even three, and without Spirka.

6

After a time it became quite clear that Karyukha was in foal from the thoroughbred. Everything changed all around her. The yard, which had never been cleared up, was now swept every morning, the fence was mended, the stable roof re-thatched, a fresh manger fixed up inside, fresh straw spread every night, and a watch kept to see that the cow Ryzhonka didn't wander in—what if she chanced to hurt Karyukha? Even our cottage seemed to be lighter. Mum whitewashed the big brick stove, made a blue trim on the front, and it seemed to smile in shy pleasure. Our homespun shirts and trousers were well washed. Mum went into the woods, collected young maple, boiled it and dyed my new shirt dark blue with a tinge of violet, so that I looked fine. There was no more storming and shouting, father stopped finding fault with mum at every turn: he didn't beat her, he was actually gentle, even considerate. He told us to obey her and help her with the housework.

Karyukha was very seldom harnessed now. She completely forgot the feel of a whip, of course. She was made much of in every way. The best fodder went to Karyukha: even pumpkin and beets, which up to now

had been Ryzhonka's privilege because they made her give more milk, were now kept for Karyukha; the bran and the best steppe hay, too, was hers. After half a year father forbade us to mount her. "You may strain her and she'll have a miscarriage," he told us sternly. When he visited his friend the miller he went on foot; and if he had to go to Balanda or anywhere too far for walking, he borrowed Bulanka from his elder brother. If previously Karyukha had borne her daughters in the field or on the road, or even in the shafts, she now had a kind of maternity leave: for two months before she was due to foal she was no longer harnessed to the cart or wooden plough, let alone the steel plough. It meant no little loss to the family. Our plot was ploughed and sowed later than any others; the vegetable plot too—only after my uncles had finished theirs and could lend us their horses. And in the spring every day, even every moment is precious, that's something everyone knows.

"Never fret, mother. We'll manage somehow, but I'm not going to harness Karyukha. And mind you don't, either."

Despite his words, father wasn't really happy about it all. But when he went outside and saw Karyukha, stout, heavy-bellied, the smile returned to his face and a sparkle to his eyes.

Karyukha was transformed. It was she and yet not she. There was something ladylike and dignified in her looks and manner. She became capricious. Mum always called her "lady" nowadays.

"Come, eat, lady, eat, dear heart," said mum when she brought Karyukha beet or pumpkin chopped fine.

But the "lady" was in no hurry to begin; she waited a little, for manners. First she snorted a refusal, then laid her ears back in annoyance, rolled a black eye at mum and finally picked up a small piece with soft lips.

One day father called us all out into the yard. While we watched, he went up to Karyukha, laid both hands on her belly and waited. His face melted in a smile, absent and suddenly tender. He stood for a long time. Then each of us went up in turn and did the same as father. I could feel strong jolts under my hands, quite close, so sharp and impatient that Karyukha started and her eyes, deep and calm, seemed to be turned inward.

We went away on tiptoe, as though afraid of startling something very frail and timid.

"Very soon," father breathed.

"Yes, very soon," mum agreed, and happy tears trembled on her lashes, still long and dark (she had been a lovely girl once).

After that somebody had to stay with Karyukha all night. It was May, and warm, but who could tell what might happen! Father took a lantern out into the stable, cleaned it, rubbed the glass, put in a neat semi-circle of new wick, trimmed it level, filled the jar with oil, lighted it, tested it, moved it from side to side (would a wind blow it out?), and gave it to me as I went to take the first shift of stable duty.

I don't know why, but I never liked staying on the floor for my shift, I always wanted to climb up somewhere high. I hung the lantern on the nail which usually held the harness (father had taken it out of the stable), clambered onto the crossbeam and settled myself comfortably. Karyukha watched me suspiciously, sighed, laid her ears back, but then calmed down and began feeling about the manger with her lips and picking up dry green blades of grass, just for something to do. Now and then a shudder ran through her and she let out a small blissful grunt, as she did when I bathed her. The lantern burned well. When my eyes became used to the light I could even see hard mounds appear and disappear every now and then on Karyukha's right flank, as though somebody were pushing a fist against it from inside. Involuntarily she turned her head to the right and twitched her brief tail.

There were various other live creatures in the stable besides Karyukha and myself. Somewhere at the edge of the roof sparrows fussed about in holes in the thatch and twittered sleepily; when I climbed onto the crossbeam they fluttered in the darkness, frightened, but soon quietened. Mice squeaked in the manger among the remains of hay and straw, probably hoping to find a stray grain or husk, or some scraps of bran. I should have felt much worse had I been alone. I was afraid to be alone in the darkness, I would have been expecting something horrid to jump out at me, but now it was quite all right. Besides, I had a fine way of occupying myself: thinking up a name for the colt. Unlike the rest of the family, I wanted a colt, not a filly,

and I wanted him to grow up big and handsome, like Uncle Mikhaila's stallion, so that people would come to father and ask for his stallion to serve their mares, and my father would be able to swagger as Uncle Mikhaila had. I would call the colt Thunder—a fine, resounding name. And we'd take him to the autumn fair in Balanda, and he'd win the races, and we'd bring home all the prizes, and Kolka Polyakov, my best pal, would envy me and ask me to show him the cap-pistol I'd bought at the fair.

My daydreaming even took me as far as Saratov, all of a hundred versts from our village; it would take a week to get there on Karyukha, but Thunder would gallop it in a day, and we'd bring back two fine wheaten loaves and a ring of smoked sausage smelling of pepper and garlic.

The thought of that bread and sausage made my mouth water so that my lips were wet, I licked them but the saliva kept on coming, and I couldn't stop it.

Lyonka came to take my place. He grabbed my trouser leg and dragged me unceremoniously down from the cross-beam, driving away all my sweet dreams.

The next night, watching in the stable, I again gave free rein to my imagination. Karyukha stood quietly by her manger, her distended body seeming to fill all the space round her, and knew nothing. She didn't know how many plans our family was building upon her still unborn child. When we were asleep and Nastenka was out, father and mum agreed that they wouldn't marry her for a couple of years; let the young man possess his soul in patience. The foal would grow up, then we'd sell either him or Karyukha or both, and buy a good young horse for farm work, and for a thoroughbred two-year-old we'd get enough to pay for Nastenka's wedding and for clothes and boots for us boys, too. If Karyukha gave us a filly, and one that took after herself rather than the sire, as we hoped, there was still a good way: sell Karyukha and use her daughter for the farm work. But that was only in the worst event. All the greatest, most far-reaching plans were based on a thoroughbred like the sire.

7

At midday Karyukha's udder swelled noticeably as it filled with milk, and turned a dark, satiny colour; the resil-

ient teats stood out, pointing away from one another as though in a quarrel. Karyukha turned sad and quiet and didn't touch her food. She lay down several times and sighed heavily, painfully. Her great black eyes had a deep, sombre glow and were full of apprehensive expectation. The bulges on her sides changed their place, and the powerful nudges from inside became more frequent.

"It'll be today, father," said mum quietly; she was the first to note the change.

There was complete silence for a moment, then fuss and excitement and running about began. We boys shot out into the yard. Only my sister remained indoors, and soon went off to her girl friend, seized with an inexplicable chill. Father vanished, and in an hour grandad, Uncle Petrukha and Uncle Pashka arrived. Later on almost all our relatives came, although father had asked only for his elder brother and his nephew Ivan, who had recently finished a veterinary course. Serious, conscious of the momentousness of this occasion, they found places on logs and reminisced about how Karyukha had foaled at other times. It appeared that she had always foaled easily, it was only with Lastochka they had had trouble. She had been sired by a stallion of an unusual breed. Ivan Kolesov had let out his black to graze for an hour or so on the recently mowed and cleared meadow, and that hour had been quite enough for Karyukha. Nobody had seen when it happened.

Karyukha's labour began round about one at night. There was nobody in the stable except father, my cousin Ivan and I myself on the crossbeam. Karyukha lay down and stretched out; she threw back her head in pain, her coat darkened with sweat, her big worn yellow teeth were tightly clenched, now and then she let out a deep hollow groan and I tensed in sympathy, I could feel her hurt, I was ready to cry. My father and Ivan knelt beside her, talking quietly. I understood from what Ivan said that father had over-fed Karyukha, the foal seemed to be very big. The sparrows chirped uneasily, the mice weren't there at all.

"Come, Karyukha, come, pet," father mumbled endearingly whenever the horse tensed in labour. "There's a good girl."

It was dawn when the two white hooves appeared,

and then a strangely elongated head. Karyukha breathed with quick, difficult gasps, gathering strength for the decisive moment. But she was evidently in too much of a hurry, her fresh effort didn't complete the difficult process. She relaxed tiredly, so that the hooves and black muzzle in the torn caul slid back a little. This time Karyukha didn't hurry. She lay for a long, long while, waiting tensely. Then she suddenly tossed her head, flung out her hind legs and tensed till she quivered from head to tail, and before anyone could realise it, the foal was on the ground, with only half the hind legs still in the mother's womb. One small effort and the last great triumphant act of birth was completed. For a little while—to us it seemed an eternity—the foal lay motionless. Could it be dead? The same chilling thought came to each. Father, stunned by the dreadful idea, lost his head for a moment and simply stared alternately at Karyukha and the new-born foal; then he mastered himself and with slippery fingers set to work rubbing Karyukha's infant, clearing greenish slime from the face. Karyukha evidently felt her master was interfering in what was none of his business; she rose on shaking legs, jealously pushed him away with one shove of her muzzle and began licking the foal. Roused either by her warm breath or the touch of the maternal tongue, the foal stirred, gave little alternate kicks with its unbelievably long, bony legs and raised a disproportionately long head.

"Ali-i-ive! " I yelled at the top of my voice.

"What are you bawling about? Off with you indoors! " father ordered angrily and I flew off that beam as though a wind had swept through.

The order was really superfluous. I was myself impatient to race indoors and be the first to bring the glad news.

"Karyukha's foaled! The foal's alive! " I yelled from the passage, too impatient to hold it in any longer.

Sanka, Lyonka and mum wanted to hurry out, but I stopped them: father had said nobody was to go.

We went out only when a huge, flaming red sun rose behind Chaadayev Hill. A nightingale poured out its songs beyond the fence, probably in the kitchen garden among the gooseberry or currant bushes; a large cock red as the sun flew onto the stable roof and loudly announ-

ced to the world the extraordinary event which had taken place in our yard early that morning. The only window in our house that faced the yard and got the first rays of sunshine laughed back in answer, shimmering with clear dewdrops rolling down it.

In some mysterious, inexplicable way the news flew round the village in a moment, and people soon began to arrive. Again there was grandad, Uncle Pashka, even Aunt Fenya, his wife; the whole of Uncle Petrukha's family came, those too young to walk being carried. Our benefactor arrived too, this time with Spirka again. The wolf hunter Sergei Zvonaryov hobbled up on his game leg, and a little later Uncle Maxim came with Aunt Orina. Father was glad to see them all, but mum's lips were angrily compressed; she was afraid of the evil eye for the filly with so many people around.

Karyukha was led out to the sunniest corner of the yard. The filly stood alongside, pressed tightly against her mother's belly. A sigh of involuntary admiration broke out. What amazed everybody was the tallness of the newborn filly, her back was almost level with that of her mother. The body was short, however, and in general she was ugly and awkward—a real ugly duckling. But those wise in horse-lore regarded this awkwardness as an incontestable sign of breeding. Father was rather worried because the filly was raven-black, although her sire had been dapple grey with a bluish tinge.

"Why is that?" he asked Mikhaila.

Mikhaila laughed at him as one might at a foolish child.

"You don't know a thing about horses, neighbour," he said condescendingly. "You wait and see what colour she'll be in three or four months. Well, and what did I tell you? It's a filly your Karyukha's got from my Fire! Isn't it? Eh?" Mikhaila rejoiced and father laughed, in the seventh heaven of happiness and pride.

Karyukha was proud and happy, too. She knew what a great thing she had achieved, and stood there in a flood of sunshine, giving everyone a chance to look at her and of course, and especially, at her daughter, an undeniable beauty. The filly's silky, delicately soft mane poured down her long arched neck onto her broad back which rose into a steep rounded crupper that seemed to

shimmer in changing colours. The fluffy tail was still short, but already switched from side to side like that of a real horse. The belly was lean and the dark, still damp hair curled. The long nostrils pulsated in winking red points, and steam came from them. Cautiously but insistently Karyukha nudged her infant towards her teats; the infant butted awkwardly under her belly, but the long muzzle slid past. It was only after a dozen tries that the attempt was successful. Her lips caught the swollen teat, a red tongue appeared, the filly snorted, choked, then quickly caught the teat again and got down to work, tail going in a quick waggle of enjoyment.

"That's right, good girl," said father with a happy sigh.

Everyone laughed in sympathy, forgetful in that glad moment of all their everyday cares and worries.

"But what are you going to call your pretty maid?" asked Mikhaila.

"Yes, that's right, what'll she be?" said father in his turn. "Who can think of the best name?"

That was the beginning of a kind of competition for a name for Karyukha's daughter, the future runner. There were many suggestions—Dawn because that was when she had been born, and Star because of the tiny white dot on her forehead, and Dove because sooner or later she would be dove-grey.

"What about May—eh? She was born in May, wasn't she?"

I don't remember now whose idea it was, but it pleased all. So our beauty was called May. After that, with a sense of duty done to the full, everybody went indoors where the table was spread. Only I remained outside in the yard. Now I could gaze my fill at May, from all angles, and perhaps even stroke her arched neck. I knew I wouldn't leave the yard till nightfall.

All gathered round the table for a real christening feast.

"Congratulations," said Grandad Mikhail who didn't drink, and just touched his lips to the glass of home-distilled which had been set before him too.

"Congratulations! Congratulations!" came from all round the table.

Spirka was especially ceremonious and as impressive as his insignificant figure allowed. He behaved as though

he and he alone were the author of the happy issue of a matter long considered. Mikhaila was condescending, restrained and quietly important, as he had been when Karyukha was wedded to his stallion. Let others think as they would, but he *knew* it was to him alone that our family owed this happy celebration. Uncle Petrukha, usually so merry and good-natured, behaved rather strangely, however. He was not the noisy leader of merriment he usually was, he was very quiet and withdrawn, unhappily thoughtful. He felt envy of his brother rising in him and the feeling was a new one, new and repellent, and worst of all, there was nothing he could do about it.

The birth of May had moved him far behind his middle brother. Even before that they had not been level, for Petrukha with his big family had only Bulanka, and she was very unlikely to give him any foals. But now, in some eighteen months, his brother would have a second horse, and what a horse! That invisible division—who has what, and how much—which had really been invisible before now began to broaden and become tangible, bringing a shudder of horror.

Uncle Petrukha saw the beast rising in him and tried to tame it. With an effort he shouted, "Congratulations, brother! And to you, Froska! "

But his congratulations came late, and his very voice sounded unnatural, forced.He must have heard that note himself, for he fell into an embarrassed silence. His toast was caught up, certainly, but in a ragged and almost forced chorus of shouts instead of one deep note. Embarrassed, trying to conceal his embarrassment, Uncle Petrukha poured a whole glass of home-distilled into his mouth—nobody had time to see how it was done, but he threw his head back like a bird drinking, so far that his sparse, uncombed goatee jutted up at a right angle to the ceiling as he tipped the glassful down his throat.

Uncle Pashka was quieter, more restrained, but somehow his expression was not one of great joy, either.

May, however, knew nothing of all this. Once sure that her long, awkward legs could stand firmly on the ground, the first thing she did was to throw up her hind quarters, flinging her hooves higher than her head, repeat the trick like giving an encore, and then three times more for good measure. This had its dangers for me, for

May was not the only one adapting herself to a new situation; I was doing the same. I crept closer and closer. badly wanting to touch her. The yard was filled with sunshine and so were my spirits. I felt as though the whole world ought to be as happy that day as I was. I itched with impatience to kiss both Karyukha and her wonderful, beautiful daughter on the face. But good sense conquered, assisted by the unmistakable attitude of May, and I retreated to a respectful distance. May's hooves might still be small, but they were of equine origin.

For some hours May never left her mother's side. She frequently pushed her long head under Karyukha's belly. Having taken possession of one teat, she didn't seem to notice that there was another beside it. Sometimes she bumped it with her nostril, but the teat was dry and hard, and she didn't catch at it with her tongue. Karyukha felt all was not well, and turned so as to offer her daughter the swollen, aching teat. At last the milk was taken from this one, too. Karyukha, grateful, gently touched May's tail with her muzzle, shifted her weight from the right hind leg to the left and dozed quietly.

May now proceeded to explore the world. A great, big world, with so many things in it! If only the filly had known human language, I would willingly have offered my services as a guide. Now May raised her head and stared at the high fence where a queer creature had just appeared, a creature crowned by a red comb, with something long and curved sticking out underneath. This creature shook itself, stretched its neck and let out a loud, piercing crow that frightened May horribly. I wanted to tell her comfortingly that this was only our cock Petka, and although he was a fighter, it was with the neighbours' cocks, there was nothing for a filly to be afraid of. And the pig under the same fence making a comfortable hollow and settling into it so that less than half of her showed—she was not so alarming as May evidently thought. Her grunting was not a threat to anyone, she simply liked lying there in the cool and was grunting with pleasure, she was probably in the best of porcine good humour. And the little grey balls that bounced around May's feet were only sparrows. They were pecking at what had not been digested in Karyukha's stom-

ach—grains of oat, millet or barley. It was silly to be frightened of them. But May rolled her eyes at them apprehensively, shifted from foot to foot and huddled closer to her mother. And there was no need at all for her to give such a start, nothing dreadful was going to happen when a magpie alighted on the fence not far from Petka. If anybody should be on the alert it was mum, for the sly chatterer certainly had designs on the straw nest from which at any moment a frantic squawking would announce an egg: magpies have a great weakness for hens' eggs. If it turned its rascally looks on May, this was simply because it had seen nothing like that in our yard yesterday, and was wondering if this new creature would be an obstacle to its sly plans. I was actually a much bigger threat, but the magpie apparently didn't notice me, probably because I was behind Karyukha and her daughter. But you couldn't explain all this to May, who was amazed at everything and frightened of everything. Such a short time ago there had been none of it all, she had been alone, in warmth and darkness. Where had it all come from?

May seemed to be thinking it all over for a moment, then she flung back her head and in glad bewilderment let out a loud, deep neigh right into the face of the sun. Karyukha wakened and answered quietly, soothingly, as much as to say, "Don't get so excited, little silly, everything's quite all right! "

May quietened, waved her soft, silky tail and then, as though she had suddenly remembered something very urgent, quickly thrust her head under her mother's belly. The thrust was so hard that Karyukha laid her ears back angrily and raised her right hind leg a little, just like a large sheep.

Indoors, things took their appointed course. An empty quart bottle was rolling under the table. Now it was only in everybody's way, and was kicked about with unconscious contempt—after all, any vessel is valued according to its contents. In the middle of the table, in the place of honour, stood another quart bottle, but with the important difference that this one was almost full. As they talked of this and that, the men let their greasily shining eyes caress it approvingly. Had it been empty, it would have lain beside the first, and the animation round

the table would have been lessening. Already, the party had shrunk. The first to give up the contest was Spirka, as usual. It took only one full glass to put him on the floor. Now he lay on his side, his head pillowed on folded arms, a blissful smile sending its rays along his wrinkles, beginning from the corners of his half-open mouth.

"He's finished," was the only comment.

Grandad Mikhail, Uncle Pashka and Uncle Petrukha had gone home, taking their families. Now the Zvonaryov brothers Sergei and Maxim were left, the half-deaf verger Ivan Morozov who had promised ten young chicks at mum's wedding but had never yet carried out his magnanimous intention. If mum reminded him of it, Ivan hemmed and hawed apologetically and promised to bring a whole sackful of chicks the next day, but never brought them. After such a reminder he didn't come at all for some days, but after a week he couldn't keep it up, came again and again promised the chicks. Now mum said nothing about them. She, perhaps more than anyone else, was irradiated with our family joy, and was kind and generous in the extreme to our guests. She even took pity on Spirka, she carefully raised his head and placed a cushion under it. For the rest she brought a third pan of potatoes fried with fat pork. And again Mikhaila was the one honoured—she placed the pan right in front of him, so that the others had to make a long arm to spear a piece of fat or potato. And Mikhaila never thought to move the pan so that everyone could get at it conveniently.

While the Zvonaryov brothers limited their share in the festivities to waiting in patient silence for the next glassful, father and Mikhaila had their heads together weaving fantastic plans all connected in one way or another with May. You could hear nothing but "When May grows up...". Mikhaila, it appeared, had a good friend in Turki village, and this friend had a racer, you'd never find its like in all the Lower Volga region. Well, so when May grew up, Mikhaila would persuade his friend to let his Baldy serve May—for a suitable price, of course. And from these two would come descendants of unequalled beauty—and value. If there wouldn't be collective farms (and the talk of them was heard more frequently and

more insistently nowadays), father would soon be a rich man—Mikhaila swore it. His plan was enticing in its simplicity: Karyukha would be sold, of course, since she was now old; in her place father would buy a good gelding of Mongolian breed to help May, a horse with great endurance and, like Karyukha, able to eat anything; May would be mainly a brood mare; her job would be to produce a foal every year, and father's job would be to sell them to rich people for big money at the Balanda market.

"You'll live like a real merchant, Nikola!"

"Nay, not me, Mikhaila, I'd never get that far," father protested modestly, but there were red patches on his cheeks, his eyes were moist and the hand holding the glass shook. Sweat stood out on his forehead and his hair clung to it in wet strands.

Mum's lips trembled as she stood by the stove with the pan-handler.

Out in the yard May continued to acquaint herself with her surroundings. She was no longer frightened of the cock, or the pig making a wallow in the damp earth by the fence, or the magpie which I kept driving away, or the sparrows. Having apparently decided there was nothing to be afraid of she ran in a circle round her mother twice, then her circles became wider until she was racing round the yard, flinging hind legs and forelegs high. Karyukha watched her uneasily, and seeing that May was quite carried away and her play might end badly (if, for instance, she flung herself at full speed on an upright post) she neighed loudly, imperatively.

May returned obediently and at once thrust her head under her mother's belly.

Thus, order was restored.

Like Karyukha, I never took my eyes off May, ready at any moment to raise an alarm if anything threatened the filly.

8

A fortnight later Karyukha was put into the shafts again. She went more than reluctantly. She had known this time would come, but she had not thought it would

be so soon. When father came to her with her old, worn collar, she flung her head up as high as she could. She had done the same thing before and knew by experience that it didn't help, but she did it all the same. Previously the master would give her a blow in the nostrils with his fist, but now he only cursed softly, jumped and got the collar on, not without difficulty. May danced round, preventing him from tightening the girths; he gave her a slap on her rump and drove her off.

"Dad, Dad, take me with you," I begged.

"Get into the cart."

Father tried to push May away from Karyukha and shut her up in the stable, but May was having none of that. So he shrugged, climbed into the cart beside me, and we started off. May made a thorough nuisance of herself, she got under her mother's feet, or ran in front, or pressed against the shafts until you expected to see her under the wheels at any moment. Father would give her a very light flick with the whip, then she would shy, or run ahead again, right under Karyukha's nose. But in the end she learned the proper thing to do, and ran alongside on the right, without hindering her mother in her work.

We were going to look at the grain. It was Sunday, a misty, windless morning. It would be some time before the rising sun would lift the white quilt of dew from the earth. The air was still cool, pleasant to breathe—for us and for Karyukha and May. It was an amazing world that was opening before the filly. For the first time she saw how great and wonderful it was, and how many other creatures it held besides herself and her mother. First, Karyukha had to stop and let a herd of cows pass. May was frightened—the cows were so *very* close, their terrible horns almost touched May. Then came a dark river of sheep. And on a hill stood something grey that awkwardly waved great grey wings—a windmill. May didn't yet know that a windmill was a windmill, that cows were cows and sheep were sheep. Thrilled and curious, she kept looking to this side and that and quite forgot that it was high time for her to thrust her head under her mother's belly for a meal. Once May saw with horror something bright-coloured and alive right under her feet. This something flapped wings, flapped them noisily and then flew straight towards the rising sun.

"It's only a bustard, little silly. What are you scared of?" said father with kind mockery, then leaned over and patted May's back.

We halted at our first field. Father unfastened the saddle-strap and slackened the girth, and Karyukha at once reached her head to the couch-grass, grey with dew. May decided to do the same, but came up against a difficulty: her legs were too long, she couldn't get down to the grass. In the end she had an inspiration and straddled her forelegs; after that it was all right. I laughed till I cried, watching her getting head lower and lower in small jerks until her nose was in the grass; but then she didn't know what to do with it. Meanwhile her hind legs, even longer than the forelegs, trembled like taut springs.

When we moved on again, a hare caused some commotion. It darted out from the boundary ridge and onto the road so suddenly that not only May was scared to death, father and I jumped too, then, laughing at ourselves and trying to hide a certain awkwardness from each other, we shouted and yelled after the hare, which in its turn was too frightened even to get into the rye, and raced along the field track in front of us. By Oak Gully Karyukha suddenly stopped, pricked her ears and snorted, staring for a long time at something on our right. Father urged her on but Karyukha didn't obey. May rubbed against the collar and huddled closely to her mother. Then father lost patience and gave Karyukha the whip. It was only after this that she moved on, but her ears were still pricked and twitching. When we had passed the gully, however, she quietened and so did her filly. The rest of the trip passed with hardly any disturbances. Here and there, it is true, speckled gophers dashed across the road, but they didn't frighten even May. After the bustard and the hare, what was a gopher to her?

My dad was now in a state of serenity and good humour, rare for him, when you could ask anything and he wouldn't refuse. I asked for the reins. He gave me them with alacrity and began rolling himself a cigarette big enough to last till we got home. He drew on it hard, then let out rings one after the other, a blue chain of smoke, and began to sing the song he always sang out in the fields.

My father was a free-born ploughman
And I worked with him alone....

The song was endlessly long, it too would have lasted to the village. But father broke off in the middle when he saw a man driving towards us, and a big dog running in front of the cart. He knew the dog would be sure to rush at May, she would be frightened and jump away and the dog, spurred on by this would run after her, catch her by the tail or even the leg, and perhaps cripple her. I saw father turn pale and his jaw muscles tightened. He told me curtly to keep good hold of the reins, jumped down from the cart and ran to meet the stranger. They stopped and talked. Then the man turned off to the left, drove some distance from the road and stopped. The dog, which hadn't seen the filly, went still farther. We passed the danger spot and galloped towards the village.

May galloped beside Karyukha, and her stride was long and free, she had to hold herself back not to run ahead.

News awaited us at home. The parents of Nastenka's sweetheart had come and said they could wait only until the Intercession Day, and not the following autumn, as father wanted.

"What's got into them?" asked father with an angry look at mum as though she were in a conspiracy with them. "I can't sell May now, can I? Are they crazy? Where's Nastenka?"

But my sister had got out of the house in good time, afraid of father. He might well have beaten her in a burst of anger. And what could Nastenka do? Her boy had told her the previous evening that he couldn't wait, his mother and father were urging him on, they were getting old and needed a helper for harvest time. Look at how much they'd ploughed and sowed.

"When May grows up—" Nastenka began. But he interrupted her angrily.

"I'm sick of hearing about May! It's not May I'm marrying, it's you!"

Nastenka bit her lips to hold back the tears. She looked at him and was still more frightened. His dark eyes, black in the darkness of night, held an angry spark.

"What's the matter?" she asked.

"Oh, nothing.... But dad and mum keep on at me. They don't give me any peace."

"Don't, my dear, don't, darling—try and quiet them. And I'll try with dad too, if you want."

But at the last moment her courage had failed her and she'd run away. Father, however, decided to go and see the future in-laws. He was gone a long time, until midnight. When he returned he was tipsy and in high spirits.

"I've talked them round. They'll wait till next autumn," he told mum.

"Praise the Holy Virgin, our intercessor, our helper," mum whispered. "We'll be able to collect some sort of dowry, bedding, at least. The trunk's empty, there are no pillows, no quilts, no sheets—naught, a shame and a disgrace. Only one daughter, folks'll say, and they can't provide even for her."

"Agh—now you're off, stop whining or—! "

Want gripped our family in its sharp claws. Winter would surely come and for three sons there was only one pair of felt boots and one sheepskin coat with a multitude of variegated patches. Lyonka and Sanka stopped going to school altogether. Lyonka was glad of the chance. He was no friend to learning. Poetry in particular was his torment, when he had to learn verses by heart and recite them in front of the whole class. He would repeat them over and over again till his head ached and swam, poor lad, but as soon as he got to school everything was gone, to the last line. Lyonka was kept back in the same form for two years if not three—the fourth form, I think it was. I caught up with him and we went to school together. Lyonka put me in the desk behind him so that I could prompt him softly. He would begin reciting and get stuck almost on the first line. He would signal me an energetic SOS, and even shake his fist at me behind his back—go on, what is it? Help me out! I'd whisper the next line, but it was as good as a poultice for a dead man. Lyonka repeated what he heard but he'd heard imperfectly, he muddled everything till the teacher stopped him; then he sat mum to the end of the lesson. The bad marks opposite his name in the form mark-book were as miserably certain as fate. So it wasn't surprising that Lyonka dropped school without the faintest regret,

the regret came when he heard father's words at the dinner table later.

"It'll be all right. As soon as May grows up, and we're doing a bit better, then Lyonka'll go to school again."

All the boldest, most radiant dreams in our family were linked up with May. It was she who was to make us all happy. My sister would marry the boy she loved. Lyonka would finish school. Sanka would at last have his own top-boots and his own jacket, I would go to school without any fear that tomorrow I might have to stop, and mum wouldn't sigh day and night, wondering how to feed and clothe us all. Father wouldn't smoke in the middle of the night, trying to smother despondent thoughts with the acrid, dulling smoke of the home-grown tobacco he cultivated himself. (When he chopped it in a wooden bowl we all rushed out, coughing and sneezing.) He wouldn't have to humble himself before his elder and younger brothers, asking them to lend Bulanka or Lastochka to help out Karyukha.

Meanwhile, May grew, played, enjoyed life and never suspected that she had become the main character in a slowly developing human drama long before she was born.

9

Karyukha seemed to know what a miracle she had wrought. The ladylike dignity she had displayed after meeting Mikhaila's stallion actually increased. She was no longer satisfied with meadow or forest hay, she must have the fragrant steppe couch-grass, and some clover or lucerne mixed with it, too. She ate slowly, narrowing her eyes capriciously and sighing her discontent. Given oats, she no longer neighed a wild delight as she had once done, she merely lowered condescending, disdainful lips. She clearly disliked our paying so many visits to her aristocratic daughter and would gladly have bitten us, but feared consequences hard to foresee. But if prudence forced restraint upon her with regard to us humans, it was a different matter with the other inhabitants of the yard, the cow, sheep, pig and dog; from them she stood

no nonsense. She took a particular dislike to our sow Khavronya, a bold, impudent female. As though it wasn't enough that she managed to steal straw from the stables in the evening for her sty, Khavronya tried to make up to May. With ingratiating grunts she would go up to the filly and raise her head—not without difficulty, intending to rub May's belly with her moist, rubbery snout. What Khavronya's final purpose might be Karyukha didn't know, so she thought it best to take warning measures. Quietly, without attracting Khavronya's attention, she turned her hind quarters to her and then gave her a kick that sent her rolling, filling the yard with piercing, anguished squeals. The cow and sheep cautiously avoided Karyukha and May. As for the shaggy dog Rascal, he had once shown an indiscreet curiosity and made an immediate acquaintance of Karyukha's hooves which had left a most unpleasant memory. The lesson was useful, however. He too maintained a respectful distance from May and her short-tempered mother.

During the daytime Karyukha was led out to graze on the recently mowed meadows. This just suited May. She seemed to go a little crazy. She flew over the grass like black lightning, she was like a great bird, you couldn't see her long legs touch the ground, you would think May was flying on a great green flying carpet. Sometimes she went so far that Karyukha raised her head and watched her uneasily. But when May became too intoxicated with running, Karyukha called her back with a ringing, imperative, stern neigh. May came up to her mother, who said a few words to her in her own way—with a light bite on May's ear.

Either Sanka or I was always there with Karyukha, or to be more exact, with May. This was a responsible job and certainly couldn't be entrusted to careless, light-hearted Lyonka. He would gather all his gang on the meadow and start fooling about, and forget the filly completely. Sanka and I were regarded as the reliable ones. Father and mum held us up to Lyonka as an example.

I don't know about Sanka, but I secretly envied Lyonka; that light-hearted lad lived as carefree as a bird, and flew wherever he wanted. He was often beaten, that was true, but on the other hand he had his freedom, the greatest reward of man's dreams.

Lyonka was popular in the village. He had more friends than anybody else. Recently his beatings had sharply increased for he had got in with some older lads and had now added one more to his long list of faults and failings—perhaps the most dangerous of them all, with priority in penalties: he had started playing cards. Not just children's games, but playing for money. Naturally, this could lead to nothing good. To play for money one must have it. To have it, one must get it somehow. He couldn't hope to get it in honest ways (try asking father!) so only dishonest ways remained.

One day Lyonka noticed that a stray sheep had come with ours into the shed. During the night Lyonka opened it helped by an accomplice from his card-playing friends. They caught the sheep and dragged it out to the back where a cart had been brought up. In the morning mum let our sheep out as usual to join the flock and as usual she counted them. Then we heard her scream.

"Merciful heavens, where's the yearling? There's one that doesn't belong, and mine's gone! Dear God, is it stolen? "

Lyonka, who had returned before dawn, was sleeping the sleep of the just in the garret on the fragrant, partly dried hay. His slightly waving fair hair lay over the hay, his legs were flung out and his shirt rucked up to his neck—a free, untrammelled attitude. Who could believe, looking at this fine lad asleep, that some hours before he had been engaged in matters that would not bear the light of day? I was the only one of the family who guessed that the disappearance of the sheep might well be connected with Lyonka's card-playing, but I loved Lyonka and couldn't breathe a word of my suspicions. I quietened my conscience by telling myself that after all, Lyonka had made off with our own sheep, not a stranger's. Could you call that stealing?

A secret is a secret, however, only if sooner or later it is disclosed. Lyonka's was. This time his beating was something to remember. Whether it drove sense into him, or whether it was because Lyonka joined the Komsomol soon afterwards and flung himself into a new fad, becoming one of the most energetic members of the drama circle at the folk house, acting heroes of the Civil War—anyhow, he forgot all about cards. Father wasn't

exactly delighted about his son's latest craze, though he preferred it to the former one. But he still didn't trust Lyonka to look after May.

Sanka and me he trusted. But despite all I could do, it was during my turn something happened that plunged the family into a kind of half alive, half dead despondency for a long time, and father almost committed suicide.

Galloping over the meadow, May failed to see a hollow under the grass, caught her left foreleg in it while going at top speed and turned a somersault. I was rooted to the spot with shock, my heart raced, I gasped like a fish, I thought I would suffocate and die. When I recovered a little May had got up, but limped on three legs; she couldn't step on the left foreleg. I ran home at top speed, saw father in the yard repairing the cart and through the tears which poured unrestrained down my face, I yelled: "Dad! Da-a-ad! Dear dad! I couldn't help it, it wasn't my fault! Da-a-ad! "

Father ran over and shook me. "What's happened? What's happened? Speak, can't you? "

"Oh, da-a-ad! May's broken a leg! "

"You're lying, you scamp! I'll kill you! "

His face purple, distorted, he ran up and down the yard and didn't seem to know what to do. He even forgot to give me a cuff. Then he ran out with a groan. I clambered up into the attic, huddled in a dark corner and pulled last year's dry, fragrant oak twigs over me. Somewhat later I heard the gate open and Karyukha entered heavily. Then came voices—one agitated, another quiet and soothing. I stayed where I was all night, ignoring mum's desperate calls: "Mishka! Mishka-a-a! Oh, Blessed Virgin, where can he have got to? What if he's in the well? Oh, mother of mercies, why must this happen to us?!!"

It was Sanka who found me, he knew all my hiding places. He dragged me out and pushed me into the house. I got quickly up onto the stove and from there looked down at father sitting at the table with my cousin Ivan. Sniffing a crust of black bread, Ivan talked soothingly.

"There's nothing to worry about, Uncle Kolya. Your May's leg isn't broken, only a sinew strained. She'll limp for a week, and then it'll all pass off."

All that week, as long as May limped, we were silent

and lived like strangers. At table there was hardly any talk, only father and mother exchanged a few brief remarks. Nastenka didn't even join the other young people in the evenings, she didn't see her boy and seemed very unhappy.

On the seventh day I was wakened by a ray of sunshine coming in through the window; it fell right on my nose and tickled. Without any clear idea of what awaited me that morning, I had a feeling that it was something great, amazing and wonderful. Driven by an impatient wish to know about it at once, this very minute, I ran to the window that looked out into the yard and saw May. She seemed to be dancing in the sunshine. She flung up her forelegs, then transferred her whole supple, beautiful body to them, then lay down and rolled and kicked as though fighting off the insistent sun. She jumped up, shook herself and galloped round the yard in big, even circles as though some trainer stood in the middle holding a rope and driving her round. But the great, the splendid thing was that she didn't limp one bit! I ran into the kitchen yelling.

"May's all right again! She isn't limping any more! "

I didn't stay to see the effect of my words, I was outside in a moment as though shot from a gun. The others ran out after me. They stood by the door, smiling and gay. Mum cried. She always did cry, for joy and for sorrow. May seemed to understand that everybody had come out to admire her; she showed off, she raced and leaped about the yard with greater fire, now and then kicking out and giving a clear, ringing, merry neigh.

Karyukha stood by the cart, fumbling with her lips among the wilted grass, warm in the sunshine. She watched her daughter through half-closed eyes, and her sides moved quietly. Karyukha was happy. Only May still didn't know, didn't guess that on this morning she had given to her mother, and to the people standing by the door, what was perhaps the happiest day in a life not too rich in joys.

10

With our hearts light and filled with space and sunshine, we wanted a celebration. And only then we remembered that tomorrow would be Trinity Sunday, after Easter the best of holidays. Very few nowadays thought about its

meaning, certainly not we children, although we were its main and most enthusiastic participants, as was the case with most holidays, for that matter. When Trinity came round, the children had the enjoyable job of bringing in branches and flowers and grasses from the woods; with these the grown-ups decorated the houses inside and out. On the Saturday evening you could see green balls rolling along all roads and paths towards the village—children carrying branches thick with leaves: maple, lime, ash, aspen, willow, oak, bird-cherry and honeysuckle. It was as though the woods themselves had come to visit us. Forest scents of all varieties mingled in an intoxicating bouquet, one to please the most critical epicure of perfume. For a whole week the peasant cottages were filled with sweet, heady, astringent fragrance. The first two days it was somewhat heavy and damp, but then as the leaves and grasses dried it became light and intoxicating, so that it made your head swim a little. And when the leaves really dried and the grass became like new hay, then the fragrance became airy and especially sweet, you could never breathe enough of it.

On Trinity Nastenka's sweetheart made his first ever appearance at our house. She saw him through the window and pushed us all out of the living room, blushing so brightly that the lobes of her ears were like drops of blood. I saw it as I hovered in the doorway, and I also saw how she seemed to change in a moment, to become pretier, and not like herself, like a stranger. That last feeling was a surprise to me, and an unpleasant one, I could find nothing better than to stick out my tongue at her. I got a slap on my back in answer. In the kitchen I almost butted my future brother-in-law in the stomach. Embarrassed, I jumped aside and only then raised my eyes to him. It had probably not been easy for him to make up his mind to come right to the home of his sweetheart, for that was not done in our village in those days. And if the ear-lobes of his girl burned, his own whole face was on fire. Mum came to his rescue.

"Come in, dear boy, go to the living room! And you, what are you gaping at, you gawk? Off with you outside!"

I obeyed quickly, for it was just what I wanted. I was ashamed to be in the house. I ran to my pal Kolka

Polyakov, and with him to his orchard, the worst orchard it was possible to imagine, one had to be intensely loyal to tell people that there wasn't a better orchard in the whole world. But Kolka assured us, his friends, that it was so. And now, after forcing our way through thick thorn bushes we climbed a gnarled, apple tree, certainly wild in origin, for every year it presented us all with a mass of very sour, very hard fruit. Socrates had probably taken his poison with less serenity than that with which we ate those apples, though our jaws twisted and tears rained down from our eyes.

Now, however, the apples were not yet formed and we started to philosophise for something to do.

"I say, Kolya, can you run to the end of the world?" I asked. (Once I had tried it, I ran towards the horizon, ran and ran but got no farther than Berezovy Pond, I was too frightened.)

"Will you give me bread?"

"Where can I get it? How much would you need?"

"Two chunks," Kolka answered with animation.

"When May grows up—" I began, the usual beginning in our family nowadays, but that wouldn't do for Kolka, he was hungry now, and in his turn suggested. "Would you like me to jump right down from here? Eh?"

"You can't!"

"I can!"

"You can't!"

"I can! Will you bet?"

"Yes! What?"

"A piece of bread. Right?"

"Right," I agreed, rather uncertainly. The piece of bread lay in my pocket and Kolka evidently had designs on it.

Almost before I'd spoken, he jumped. The next moment he was yelling like mad. I slid down quickly. Kolka lay on his back kicking. Dark blood was flowing fast from his heel. I was so frightened I almost turned and ran, but the thought of my friend stopped me. I felt the place that was bleeding and discovered the hard end of a long dry thorn. As our nails were never cut (we bit them off when they got too long), I was able to grip it as in pincers, and yanked it out with a single jerk. Kolka yelled louder than ever, but I showed him the cause of

his suffering and gradually he quietened. The honourably earned and solemnly delivered piece of bread restored his good spirits. He even broke off a small piece for me.

"You have some, too," he said generously.

We finished the bread in a moment. Kolka slipped the crust into his pocket.

"For my little sister," he confided.

We said nothing for a while, for some reason our spirits flagged.

Then Kolka asked: "Will you let me ride May?"

"She's too young," I said.

"When she gets bigger, I mean."

"Then, yes."

"We haven't got a horse," said Kolka.

"I know. I promise I'll let you ride May."

That settled, our spirits rose again, the world opened and became vast and wide, and we didn't know whether it had an end, and whether you really could go to the end of the world.

11

In the autumn it was not Nastenka, but May who was decked out anew. With the first snow she finally changed her dark coat for one of pale grey, with blue-grey shadings and great dapples; it was she, not Nastenka, who looked like a bride. She now stood a good span taller than Karyukha, who looked uglier than ever by contrast. Clumsiness which had not previously been noticed was now painfully clear; the big sagging belly, the short work-bowed legs, the thin ragged switch of a tail, the equally thin, short mane which I could never keep clear of burs no matter how hard I tried, the cracked, spread hooves, the short neck pulled down by the weight of the head and finally the head itself whith deep hollows over the eyes and a flabby pendulous lip—seen beside May's sculptured beauty and grace she was depressingly ugly. But like every mother who has given everything to her child, Karyukha was not depressed by it.

Often now grandad came into our yard. Sometimes he didn't even come indoors, but stood there in the yard feasting his eyes on the young runner; he would pat her

arched neck and high crupper, let his kind eyes caress her and then go quietly away. Karyukha never stirred at these times, she didn't lay her ears back jealously or turn angry eyes on her old master. She was still on good terms with him, grandad had never beaten her, never shouted angrily when he, as carrier, drove her to Saratov. And now she liked to see him pet May and show his delight in the miracle clever Karyukha had wrought.

Uncle Petrukha and Uncle Pashka, however, had stopped coming. Perhaps it was because they had their own cares and worries after the division of property, or perhaps there was some other reason—who could say? Father visited his brothers, but they didn't visit him. After going to them he always came home disturbed, morosely silent, and his spirits rose again only after he had spent some time with May. He was out in the yard a good part of the day now; he mended the fence and the wicket gate, he mended the big gate which had used up all my grease and again creaked horribly when it was closed. Every time the girls came to us for an all-night sewing party and the boys came to hang around them, father didn't go to bed till dawn, he was outside seeing that the gate was shut after every one who came or went. The next day he scolded Nastenka, and said this was the last time, he was tired of freezing from evening till dawn because of her swains—he used a contemptuous term in the plural, although he well knew she had only one "swain", the one she was to marry. Nastenka bit her lip and said nothing, only wished the cursed winter and the summer would pass quickly so that autumn would come and bring her wedding. Since the previous evening she had wanted it more than ever. Two or three times she had caught a glance, brief as lightning and just as bright and burning, cast by one of her friends at her own, Nastenka's, boy. He, pierced by that glance, sat very quiet, looking helpless and quilty. A pang shot through Nastenka, fear chilled her heart, it beat quickly, she could have scratched out that girl's eyes.

"They needn't come," she said to father angrily. "Much I want them! "

After that day she would take her knitting or spinning and go off herself till morning, and again father wouldn't be able to sleep, afraid that she would forget to

shut the gate when she came in. He would sit on the edge of the bed, his bare feet dangling, and smoke, coughing dully and spitting out on the floor. The dog might have given warning but he was gone, my elder uncle had lured him away and now he guarded that yard. Every couple of hours father would slip his bare feet into felt boots, throw a coat over his shoulders and go out to take a look at Karyukha and May. He would spend ten minutes in talk with them—he talked and Karyukha and May listened. And distant stars watched them from a cold sky and seemed to be listening too, silent and mysterious. Very often in these late, chilly hours a cock would crow suddenly, startlingly loud in the silence of night, so that May started and threw up her head and father, cursing softly, went back into the house.

Nastenka's boy always saw her home. They would stand a long time by the gate because neither of them wanted to make the decisive move which would part them until the following evening. Besides, each one was afraid of offending the other by too great alacrity. If I go at once, he'll be hurt, he'll say I don't love him any more, thought Nastenka. How can I say: better go in, it's late, when I don't want her to go, he thought in his turn, she'll think I want to leave her and I don't, I don't want her to go. And he squeezed her hand so tightly that Nastenka gave a cry and then kissed his cold firm cheek. And so they would stand for an hour, and another, and sometimes for three, until they were chilled through, until father's ominously warning cough sounded from the entry.

Nastenka slipped past him, a quick shadow, slid silently into the living-room, undressed and covered herself hurriedly with the quilt. We boys could hear her rapid breathing.

A short time before this father had introduced something new, amusing for us, his sons, but definitely not to May's liking. In the first place, it was time to wean her. May took advantage of her mother's love and drew so much from her teats that Karyukha was getting thin. The spoiled child, already big, needed a great deal of milk and how could Karyukha make it in winter, when the master was grudging with fodder? So father made a kind

of muzzle for May out of a hedgehog skin, put aside in readiness at the end of the previous summer; now, when May poked her head under Karyukha's belly it pricked painfully and Karyukha kicked out, bit May and moved away. At first May simply couldn't understand what had got into her mother, she would try a second time and a third, but Karyukha would drive her off angrily.

After some five or six days May forgot about milk, and Karyukha began to put on weight again. Then father decided to take the next step, to introduce May to bridle and halter. The bridle wasn't a real one, it was made of rope, the halter likewise. After the hedgehog muzzle, the bridle didn't worry her, but the first touch of the whip was another matter. May started, reared, fell on her back, jumped up, reared again and again, tossed her head and neighed loudly, piteous and frightened. Karyukha, shut up in the stable for greater safety, answered with an agitated, angry call; we could hear her dashing about inside, pushing against the door, battering it with her hooves. But there was no help coming for May. Stung again by the whip, she dashed away and galloped round the yard, her silvery tail streaming out behind her.

"That's right, May!" father shouted gaily. "That's the way, girl! Keep it up! Round with you again, aga-a-ain, girl!"

Spurred on by the shouting more than the whip, May seemed to fly—at least, we, watching with all our eyes, shouting with father, couldn't see her slender hooves touch the ground—perhaps because it was covered with fresh snow, and she flew over it as though over the clouds. The fine snow rose under her hooves and had no time to settle, for May was running faster and faster in the circle, until in the end it was a wild mad chase. It was only on the twentieth round that she began to flag, her flight became heavier, slower, her feet sank stickily into the snow, trampled and suddenly dark. Father stopped brandishing the whip and shouting. We too were quiet, waiting for the next thing. After two or three more circles May stopped. Father drew her to him with the rope, kissed the hot, steaming nose, patted her wet, dark neck and led her slowly about the yard.

May followed the master meekly.

She approached the fodder with full adult under-

standing. She ate quietly, steadily, getting on with the job. Karyukha, let out of the stable, looked for some time in surprise at May, who completely ignored her mother, as though offended with her. Nevertheless, Karyukha set to work licking off May's first working sweat—salty, bitter, sharp-smelling, as familiar to Karyukha as though it were her own.

That was the end of May's carefree childhood.

This event was the great subject at the dinner table. Everybody had something to say, although it wasn't the custom in a peasant family to chatter while eating. But now we all talked at once, loudly praising May, her racing attributes, her long legs, her strong heart which was beating as quietly as usual only two or three minutes after that mad gallop.

"A fine mare she'll be," said father, summing up, and his merry eyes sought mum's, which in full understanding avoided his.

"Now, come on, Mother—a day like this...."

"D'you think I grudge it, then? They'll all be along, drat'em. Noses like dogs', smell it a verst away."

Mum went to the stove, knelt down, drew back a curtain and brought out a quart bottle from under the flooring, grey with dust. Father cleared his throat impatiently and rubbed his hands. Nobody looked at the window, nobody saw two figures only too familiar hurrying towards the house—Mikhaila in front, Spirka following, catching up with a hop, skip and jump, holding up his wadded trousers with one hand.

Some imp must have whispered to them the exact moment, for they came on the dot, and mum realised that her quart was doomed. There was nothing to be done, you can't hide a quart bottle when visitors are brushing the snow off their felt boots in the entry, so she sighed deeply, held her kerchief to her face for some reason and went back to the stove, which breathed wide-mouthed opposite the window. The window laughed back at mum with tears of merriment rolling down.

Father, however, pretended to be delighted at the guests' arrival and rather curtly made it clear to us boys that it was time for us to make ourselves scarce and free the table for Mikhaila and Spirka.

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Again they celebrated until late. When the visitors left, father climbed up on the stove and fell asleep at once. Later he told us he had dreamed of great-grandmother Nastasya who had died in '21, she shook him and said very impressively: "You'll drink yourself into bad trouble, Nikolai, mark my words! " Father woke up and tried to remember where he was and what had happened. When his head cleared he fell asleep again, and again dreamed of great-grandmother Nastasya. Then he thought he heard Karyukha neighing, faintly and far away. His tired, dulled brain tried to grasp the sound but couldn't, other vague sounds and sights came between. Outside it was cold and windy. The wind moaned in the chimney, imperfectly closed—that sound which is taken for the hearth goblin. A piece of straw hanging from the roof scratched against the frosty window. Everybody slept—we brothers as usual on straw bedding spread on the floor, under mum's sheepskin coat. And as usual, Lyonka and Sanka, on either side of me, kept pulling at the coat, which seemed to become smaller with every year. I was in the middle so I didn't suffer from the silent contest of my elder brothers. But in the end they too quietened, turning back or belly to me. Mum washed up, swept the kitchen floor, fed the calf which had been born not long before, spun a little, then she too lay down on the wide bench under the icons and fell asleep.

It was some time after midnight when Nastenka came home. There was the inevitable long good-night. A blizzard was sweeping along the street, so the young fellow came into the yard with her. They found a sheltered spot by the door and sat down on the step, pressed close together, and forgot everything on earth—the cold, the lateness of the hour, our stern father who might come out at any moment to storm at them, and Karyukha and May standing by the sleigh in the middle of the yard crunching at something.

But everything has to end. They said good-night at last and finally. Nastenka dived into the darkness of the entry, shut the door and slipped the bolt. And the young man walked briskly out of the yard, still drunk with the warmth of her lips. What thought could he have for the

gate? He didn't even notice how he passed through it. Head down, caught up in the incomparable joy of measuring his young, strong body against the elements, against the whirling snow and wind, he shouted, he sang, and the stinging snowflakes caught on his burning face melted in an instant, unable to cool the flame that burned him.

Karyukha might have been waiting for this moment. The north wind carried from the threshing floor the scent of hay, oat straw, grain and dry birch twigs. Why not taste all these joys, since fortune was so kind? Nickering softly to May, Karyukha made for the open gate, pushed it further open with her head and went out. She knew very well where to go. Two days before she had marked a stack by the nearest threshing barn, it was from this that the sharp, alluring smell came.

May, finding herself free, ran a couple of circles round her mother, squealed happily, and ran to the threshing floor. Her voice carried to the edge of the woods where grey shadows slunk, vague in the whirling snow. Moving quickly, they came close to the threshing floor and waited, motionless.

The signal was given only when Karyukha and May, huddled close to the stack, started peacefully pulling out hay and eating it.

The forces of the pack were distributed with amazing speed. The leader was on the white cap of snow covering the stack, four strong beasts took up positions behind the horses in a shallow ditch half filled with snow—these five were to attack the young horse. Two wolves remained in ambush, and two more had the job of keeping Karyukha occupied, away from her daughter. The disposition of forces completed, the second signal came from the leader. Gnashing his teeth loudly, he leaped onto the filly's back while three other wolves seized her tail and a fourth sprang at her neck. May leaped back from the stack with a strangled neigh. Three pairs of powerfully clawed paws dug into the snow, ploughed through it—in the morning we all saw those deep furrows, down to the very earth, fifty metres long. Karyukha tried to rush to May's help, she screamed loudly, but four wolves attacked her too. May, exerting all her strength, dragged the wolves with her. One was hanging from her neck and the

leader was riding on her back, his fangs in her withers. At his signal the wolves let go of her tail. Freed unexpectedly, May stumbled, fell, and that was the end of the struggle. Blood streamed out on the white snow from throat and belly ripped open in an instant.

The main aim achieved, Karyukha was now left in peace. Bitten and bleeding, she ran to our house several times but nobody came out to help. Later on some of us remembered hearing her neigh but not attaching any importance to it. Karyukha might be asking for food or water, and in such cases we didn't always go out. "She can wait till morning," we said.

When father learned what had happened he collapsed on the ground, unconscious, and mother busied herself with him. Nastenka, the first to realise how it had happened, hid behind the stove, shaking feverishly. We brothers ran to the threshing-floor. Beside the end barn stood its owner, setting his stack to rights.

"Couldn't take care of your racer. Eh—breeders! " he said gloomily when he saw us.

For half a verst round the floor we could clearly see the traces of the night's drama. But we had little thought for that. The first thing we saw was May, or rather, all that was left of her. There was on the torn hide, the head, the silvery tail just visible on the blood-stained white of the snow, the red ribs like fresh hoops and the long legs with their small polished hooves.

Shattered by the sight, we quickly returned home, for we realised that it was there the worst of all could happen. And we were right. Father recovered consciousness, guessed at once whose fault the disaster was, and with a savage roar rushed into the living room, mum after him. She managed to reach Nastenka first because she knew where the girl was hiding. Before we reached the house we could hear the desperate screams of the women and father's curses, too dreadful to repeat. Father was beating mum and Nastenka with a strap that ended in a heavy brass buckle, one he had kept from his army days, and his face was bloodless. The three of us managed to drag him off, tie him with ropes and get him on the bed. In the evening he quietly asked us to unfasten him.

Sanka and Lyonka did so. He swung his legs down,

dropped his head and sat motionless for a long, long time. We did not know what his thoughts were. But he was thinking: Was it the wolf I didn't kill that time by Far Crossing that's killed May now? And he was thinking that this was the end, he was finished, no hope anywhere. The best thing he could do now was to take that rope....

He picked up the rope and went out into the yard where Karyukha stood despondently, her hurt leg lifted. He passed her and went towards the stable. Without haste, he fixed the rope to the crossbeam where I had sat the previous spring when Karyukha had foaled. He made a noose, tested it, pulled it a couple of times to make sure it was strong. But he didn't get to the next, decisive step. I interfered. With a premonition of disaster, driven by fear, I ran out into the yard, didn't see father and for some reason made straight for the stable. And there I yelled so loudly that they heard me in the house.

"Da-a-ad! Dad, do-o-on't! "

For a week we never left father alone. We took turns at being with him. Nastenka vanished somewhere, mum said she had gone to a town some way off, to a distant relative. Her boy drank away his grief and soon afterwards married a friend of Nastenka's, perhaps the very one who had aroused Nastenka's secret jealousy. Karyukha nursed her wounds quietly. Grandad and my uncles came to try and console father. But he was silent. Only once I saw a spark of animation on his haggard face, turned suddenly old; this was when Mikhaila, likewise come to sympathise, said in passing, "Why should you worry, Nikolai? You're a poor peasant, you'll soon find a warm spot in the kolkhoz. They say someone'll be coming from town any day now to start it going. But what about me? They'll take the stallion, say I'm a kulak, strip me, and that's the end of me! "

"What kolkhoz? " father asked in weary indifference.

"As if you didn't know," Mikhaila said angrily. "But don't be in too big a hurry to shout hurrah. It won't be all honey for you, either. They'll say you let out the filly to the wolves on purpose, so as not to give it to the collective. And try to prove you didn't."

Mikhaila soon left, but his final words bent father's

head down to the very floor. He soon rose, however, went out into the yard, walked up and down beside Karyukha, returned to the house, picked up scissors and carbolic and went out again. He carefully clipped the hair round Karyukha's hurts, washed the unhealed wounds with carbolic and bandaged them tightly with sacking. Then he stood before the mare, looked a long time into her mournful eyes, hugged her convulsively and, with a sob, said hoarsely, "Never mind, never mind, Karyukha, some day again we'll ... some day may be...."

The north wind after blowing a whole week changed to the west. Soon low, moisture-laden clouds sailed across the sky and soft, fluffy snow descended. The big white flakes fell on Karyukha, father gazed at her under lashes heavy with snow, the light quivered and in this pale light Karyukha, whitened, grew younger before his eyes, and strangely like May. And again disjointed words broke from father's lips.

"Never mind, old girl.... Some day, maybe, again...."

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